THE BARBARIANS

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INTRODUCTION

Barbarians. The label itself is an insult.

For centuries, people have been taught to demean the tribes that overran the fabled Roman Empire. They were not only feared and loathed but branded as ferocious, filthy, and ignorant. Their tribal names – Goths, Huns, Vandals – became synonyms for savagery.

It was the barbarians, the story went, who reversed the progress made in Greece and Rome and interrupted the spread of Western civilization. The 600 years they dominated Europe - from the fall of Rome to the time of the Crusades - were written off as the Dark Ages.

The truth, though, is far more complex and interesting.

The barbarians began very much as we think of them, but they also had a vigor and initiative that the Romans had lost in their years of dominion - and a sense of justice and individual worth that was all their own. As the hordes from the north gradually melded with the empire, they enriched its culture with their robust art and epic sagas even as they soaked up the Roman way of life and Christian faith. When the Renaissance finally burst into bloom, the result was not just a revival of classicism but a whole new civilization – one that couldn't have existed without the barbarians' input.

By the time of its demise, the Roman Empire had been fending off invaders for eight centuries. In fact, ever since *homo sapiens* displaced the Neanderthals, the place we now call Europe has witnessed a constant influx of newcomers. Some, like the Germanic tribes that plagued the Romans, originated in the northern parts of the continent. Others came from Africa and still others from Asia Minor. But the critical flow, beginning with the Scythians 3,000 years ago,

trickled in from the steppes of Central Asia. Successive waves of Avars, Huns, Sarmatians, and many more nomadic peoples muscled their way into Europe, each tribe seemingly fiercer and stronger than the last. Settled tribes yielded to them, retreating south and east and displacing others. Successive groups learned new customs and traditions from the people they had conquered, trading their nomadic life for the security of farms and villages, only to be shoved aside in their turn by the next wave of newcomers.

Twenty-one hundred years ago when Julius Caesar first fought the barbarian tribes of Gaul, they were, indeed, uncivilized. They had begun drifting south some 2,500 years ago, in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, from their original homeland in Scandinavia. But they were still few in number and primitive in lifestyle. These nomadic herdsmen, who hunted and fished to supplement the food supplied by their flocks, were fierce, intimidating warriors who relished battle and the plunder it provided. A century later, most of them had settled into hamlets of wattle-and-daub huts, tending some crops but still living primarily to make war.

The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus described them as having “blue eyes and reddish hair; great bodies, especially powerful for attack, but not equally patient of hard work; little able to withstand heat and thirst, though by climate and soil they have been inured to cold and hunger.”

Caesar referred to the barbarians as Gauls, from the Roman name for the province he was expanding in what is now France and part of Germany. But the Germanic tribes had separate identities even before they left Scandinavia, and each of them held its own lands. The Celts, Caesar’s main opponents, lived in western France and eventually Ireland. The Franks settled south of the Rhine and gave their name

to France; the Visigoths lived along the Danube and their kinsmen the Ostrogoths farther east in the Black Sea region. The Vandals occupied southern Poland, while the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons held territory along the North Sea Coast.

During the next two centuries, the frontier of the empire stabilized in northern Europe along the Rhine and the Danube. But several trends were at work.

The first was a profound transformation in the empire itself. By CE 400, Rome had lost the energy, discipline, and character that had kept it dominant for eight centuries. Leadership of the empire had shifted to Constantinople, where Byzantium, the glorious Eastern Roman Empire, was now the wealthiest and paramount power. In the end, the western empire succumbed to its own decadence: The hordes from the north only provided the final push.

Europe had become a backwater. In the city of Rome, the population was shrinking and trade with the outside world declining. The great estates of the nobility were not gaining but ebbing in wealth. Great swaths of land that had once produced crops were being reclaimed by forests. The integrity and efficiency of the Roman government had been eroded by political expediency and corruption. Roman citizens had grown soft from centuries of prosperity; rulers subdued the masses with endless bread and circuses that kept bellies full and minds occupied. Many Romans did no work at all, and even those who did had an easy time of it; a century after Caesar, fully 150 days of the Roman year were official holidays. Not surprisingly, it was hard to find Romans willing to take up the hard life of soldiers.

The second great trend of the era was the mingling of the Germanic tribes with the Romans as the newcomers learned

the ways of the empire. Some of them had settled in Gaul, living peacefully alongside their Roman neighbors. Even tribes outside the frontier increasingly visited Gaul and bartered with Roman merchants - food, hides, and slaves in exchange for silver bowls, farm implements, furniture, and gaudy trinkets specifically made for the barbarian trade. Tribespeople prized Roman coins, not as money but to wear as jewels. After centuries of intermingling, barbarians and Romans were learning to tolerate and even appreciate each other.

But unlike the self-indulgent Romans, the tribesmen retained their zest for battle and were happy to enlist in the army, which the Romans increasingly shunned. By CE 400, there were more barbarians than Romans in the legions - and many of the empire's best generals were barbarians as well. They didn't seem to mind that their duty was mainly to fight other barbarians; they had been doing that all along.

The third great trend was the wholesale conversion of people to Christianity. The new faith spread quickly in the empire, spurred on by its message of hope for the poor and the promise of eternal salvation. By CE 330, Emperor Constantine the Great, himself a believer, had legalized Christianity and moved his capital from Rome to Constantinople, which would flourish for a millennium as the center of the Eastern Empire and its Church.

The new religion also attracted the barbarians. Christian missionaries from both Rome and Constantinople traveled among the Germanic tribes, making many converts. This convergence of faiths, however, was not the unifying agent it might seem. The missionaries sowed discord between the tribal converts and the Church because the creed they preached was Arianism, which held that Christ was a perfect man but not divine. In the Church's concept of the Holy

Trinity, this assertion was heresy. What seems a trifling difference to modern minds became the fiercest doctrinal dispute of the early Church, which saw barbarian Christians as no better than heathens.

The schism would last for centuries until the Church's version of Christianity finally prevailed. But so would another, perhaps deeper and even more divisive gulf: the contempt of the Romans for people they considered inferior. Even as they lived side by side with the newcomers, traded with them, relied on them to defend the empire, and in some cases even intermarried, most Roman citizens could not accept barbarians as equals - or respect them. Rome's treatment of the tribes finally triggered rebellion, culminating in the ultimate destruction of the Western Roman Empire.

The era that followed was chaotic – a period of small kingdoms engaged in never-ending wars and shifting alliances, with rulers striving to adapt Roman techniques of government to tribal rules and customs. The melding of cultures was slow and difficult, with many setbacks along the way. But the result was something no one from either side of the divide could have foretold or even imagined: Europe - a culture that would lead the world for centuries in learning, science, invention, exploration, music, the arts, and political freedom.

In the end, European culture is far more than a resumption of the Greek and Roman classicism that had been so rudely interrupted by medieval darkness. Europe's geographical and political lines were profoundly shaped by the barbarians' conquests, rivalries, and occasional defeats. Christianity grew in the fertile soil of tribal faith - and European art and architecture were invigorated by the barbarians' vision and energy. Modern languages have tribal

roots, and barbarian sagas and epic poetry helped shape European literature. Modern codes of law draw on principles and precedents of tribalism as well as Greek and Roman statutes. Perhaps most important, the tribal concept of individual rights and justice for all never lost its power – despite (or perhaps because of) all the forms of feudalism, autocracy, oppression, and outright tyranny that Europeans have experienced.

In time, that seed of discord would blossom into democracy. But the passing of the barbarian epoch laid the groundwork for the birth of modern Europe and everything that came along with it.

This book reveals the real story of the barbarians.

We'll begin with the epochal event that shook civilization and signaled the end of the western empire: the sacking of Rome by Alaric the Visigoth in the early fifth century CE. Then we'll step back and review the long history of the waves of barbarian invaders who pushed into Europe from the steppes of Asia, beginning 3,000 years ago with the nomadic Scythians, and then trace the tribes from Scandinavia, who migrated south to plague the empire until it finally crumbled. We'll examine the successes and failures of the principal barbarian tribes over the six centuries of their dominance and explore the surprising role of the Church as the era progressed. We'll review the rise of France and the Holy Roman Empire and show how the last great wave of barbarians – the Vikings – turned west to colonize a new world in Greenland and North America. A final chapter will explain feudalism, the strange structure that held society together from the late barbarian era into the early Renaissance, and outline how all this foreshadowed and laid the foundations for the civilization that became Europe.

This rich heritage – the flowering of learning, the bold exploration and colonization of the globe, new political and economic structures, the idea of personal freedom – all were in large part the fruit of barbarism. And finally, the belief that barbarians and medieval Europe belonged to a dark age is conclusively put to rest.

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1

"THE THICKER THE HAY, THE EASIER MOWED"

THE SACK OF ROME

Rome was in grave danger – not just the far reaches of the empire but the Eternal City itself. The barbarians were at the gates. In the year CE 410, the very heart of civilization was about to fall.

The irony? The barbarians were also defending the gates.

By the end of the fourth century CE, the bulk of the Roman army was recruited from the tribes. The legions even used barbarian military tactics, shouting tribal battlecries and forming wedges to fight rather than the traditionally straight Roman lines.

A barbarian was also running the empire.

Flavius Stilicho, a brilliant general who had risen through the ranks, had become regent for Rome's boy emperor, Honorius. Skillfully deploying his dwindling legions against the growing tide of tribesmen, Stilicho had turned so many disasters into victories that a colossal statue of him had been erected in the Forum, with an inscription hailing the courage and fidelity that had won him the "exceptional love" of the Romans – despite the fact that he was half Vandal.

The division of the empire was now official. By CE 395, the western frontier was in such turmoil that Emperor Theodosius formally split his realm between his two sons so each of them would be able to respond quickly to threats from the tribesmen. The older son, Arcadius, was to rule the thriving eastern empire from Constantinople, while Honorius would govern the larger but crumbling western part from his capital at Ravenna, in northern Italy. But since Honorius was only eleven years old, Theodosius named Stilicho the boy's regent.

It had been eight centuries since the Celts of Gaul had sacked Rome, and the empire had become so powerful that

the Romans had long since stopped fearing attack. But by CE 406, the barbarian pressure in central Italy grew so strong that Stilicho had to recall all the imperial legions from the Rhine frontier to defend the city.

That left only an unreliable band of Frankish allies to guard the borderlands. On the last night of the year, 15,000 barbarians, led by Stilicho's Vandal kinsmen, pushed across the frozen Rhine into northern Gaul, indiscriminately killing and plundering as they made their way through the province. The Franks did nothing to stop them.

Adding to Stilicho's problems, another barbarian general, Alaric, was in outright rebellion against the empire. He had good reason: His Visigoth kinsmen had long been Roman allies, sending warriors to the legions, absorbing Rome's culture and benefiting from its trade. But the Romans continued to treat them with disdain. Visigoth troops were underpaid for their services and sacrificed to war; Alaric himself failed to get the promotion he felt he deserved.

When a large band of Goths migrating from the east under pressure from Hunnish invaders arrived in Rome and appealed for sanctuary, the Romans reluctantly admitted them but confiscated their weapons, gave them insufficient land to sustain themselves, and actually enslaved a number of them. Seething with resentment, Alaric left the legions, was elected king of the Visigoths, and led his warriors on a rampage through Roman territory in Greece. He invaded Italy in 402 and was defeated by Stilicho in a battle on Easter Sunday. But he and his loyal, resentful Goths remained a constant threat.

Stilicho himself was under pressure in the increasingly devious and unpredictable politics of the empire. He had suffered some defeats, and Honorius's courtiers in Ravenna

were undermining Stilicho in discussions with the young emperor, now in his twenties but still weak and feckless. Among other things, the conspirators faulted Stilicho for battling on Easter Sunday and for supporting Alaric's claim that his Goths be paid.

But Stilicho's fidelity to the empire held true. He made no effort to defend himself. When he was arrested, he told his followers not to intervene, and when Honorius ordered his execution, he went stoically to his death. Having discarded his only capable general, Honorius had sealed his place among the worst of Rome's emperors and had doomed his city.

Even worse, the emperor also sanctioned the conspirators' killing of the wives and children of the legions' barbarian mercenaries. Thousands were massacred. That incredibly foolish imperial whim would lead to repeated disasters, beginning with the wholesale desertion of enraged barbarian troops to join Alaric. Emboldened, Alaric led another invasion of Italy, and in September of 408, he besieged Rome, surrounding all thirteen gates and blockading the River Tiber. Within weeks, decaying corpses littered Rome's streets.

Fearing the worst, the Senate sent out a pair of high-ranking envoys to negotiate with the Visigoth leader. They started with bluster: If Alaric attacked, they assured him, he would be met by overwhelming force. "The thicker the hay," Alaric replied with a sardonic laugh, "the easier mowed."

The envoys got the message. "What is your price?" they asked. The answer: all the gold and silver in Rome, every slave of barbarian origin, and all of the city's movable property.

“What, then, oh, king, will that leave us?” they asked in despair.

“Your lives,” he said.

Soon Alaric’s wagons left Rome, carrying 5,000 pounds of gold, 30,000 pounds of silver, 4,000 silk tunics, 3,000 scarlet-dyed skins, and 3,000 pounds of pepper.

In addition, as a contemporary Roman wrote, “Almost all the slaves that were in Rome left the city day by day and joined the barbarians to the number of 40,000.” Their exodus was not an isolated phenomenon. In Gaul and Spain, oppressed slaves and peasants welcomed the invaders as liberators and aided their takeover by rising in revolt.

With his added ranks, Alaric besieged Rome twice more in the next two years. But oddly, he still considered himself loyal: His goal was not to overthrow the Empire but to win fair treatment for his people and what he saw as his own rightful title: commander-in-chief of the Roman legions. The Romans, however, had no intention of granting either. On August 4, CE 410, Alaric besieged Rome for the last time – and the Eternal City finally fell.

In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon described the Visigoth sacking of Rome. “The trembling senate,” he wrote, “without any hopes of relief, prepared, by a desperate resistance, to delay the ruin of their country. But they were unable to guard against the secret conspiracy of their slaves and domestics; who, either from birth or interest, were attached to the cause of the enemy. At the hour of midnight, the Salarian gate was silently opened, and the inhabitants were awakened by the tremendous sound of

the Gothic trumpet. Eleven hundred and sixty-three years after the foundation of Rome, the Imperial city, which had subdued and civilized so considerable a part of mankind, was delivered to the licentious fury of the tribes . . .”

For six days, the Visigoth king let his men kill, loot, and rape. Many of Rome’s remaining slaves took advantage of the situation to desert their masters and join in the pillage.

There were a few bright spots in the tragic picture. Alaric gave strict orders to his forces to keep their hands off the churches of St. Peter and of St. Paul.

Indeed, many of the barbarian warriors were Christians, who would never have damaged the relics of the saints. When a raging Gothic band came upon an old woman with a hoard of precious goblets, bowls, and plates, they let her alone when she told them, “These are the consecrated vessels belonging to St. Peter; if you presume to touch them, the sacrilegious deed will remain on your conscience.”

But Alaric, hearing what had happened, commanded that the objects all be brought to the Vatican. Needing no further prompting, his men returned loaded down with vessels of gold and silver. In truth, Alaric’s brutality was more restrained than that of later raiders who plundered the Eternal City and certainly less savage than the Romans themselves in many of their victories.

Alaric did not live long after his sacking of Rome. Before the year was out, he and his men had set their sights on Sicily and then Africa, intending to loot their stores of grain. But a storm battered his ships, some of them broke up and sank, and many warriors drowned. After reaching port at Cosenza, in southern Italy, Alaric died, most likely of some type of fever.

Alaric’s sacking of Rome was an epochal event, one that sent shock waves across the continent and into Asia. The western Roman Empire would struggle on for another half century, but Rome’s fall tipped it into its final years, leaving Byzantium as the reigning seat of civilized culture. The eastern empire became the primary bastion against the coming Muslim world, a role it would play for another 1,000 years.

Finally, it was the beginning of the barbarians’ era of dominance, and their crucial part in shaping the culture that would become modern Europe.

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2

"THEIR QUIVERS ARE LIKE AN OPEN GRAVE"

THE EARLY BARBARIANS

The barbarians plaguing the Roman Empire were only the latest in Europe's list of invaders.

Long before recorded history, primitive peoples banded together as hunter-gatherers, then as herdsmen who wandered with their flocks to find fresh pastures. Stronger tribes took the better lands from weaker tribes. Droughts, famine, or the encroachment of even stronger foes forced migrations of whole peoples into new territories. And when they conquered the inhabitants, the invaders plundered their farms and villages. Over time, the nomads took up the ways of their victims and assimilated.

This blending of cultures could be more or less thorough, but it almost always occurred. In Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization, the Assyrians were overrun by the Akkadians, who were conquered in about the twenty-fifth century BCE by the Gutians, who may have originated in China. The Gutians also overwhelmed the Sumerians but were then so absorbed into their culture that they apparently became Sumerian themselves. Rome itself was founded by people who came from somewhere to the north and east to overwhelm and absorb the Etruscans of Italy.

Assimilation, however, could take centuries – and before blending in, the invaders fascinated and horrified their more civilized victims with their uncouth behavior.

The tribesmen inspired fearful respect, mixed with condescension. In the fifth century BCE, the worst menace was the Scythians, who dominated an enormous swath of eastern Asia north of the Black Sea. The Greek historian and traveler Herodotus, who visited the Scythians about 450 BCE, left a memorable description of their warriors.

After killing his first man, Herodotus wrote, a Scythian drinks his blood. He cuts off the heads of all he kills in battle and brings them to the king. Whoever brings a head shares in whatever booty they take. He flays a head as follows: Making a circular cut above the ears, he grasps it and shakes loose the scalp. Then he scrapes off the flesh with the bone of an ox. When the scalp dries, he kneads it with his hands, and having softened it, he has a sort of handkerchief. He ties it to the bridle of his riding horse and shows it off. Whoever has the most such handkerchiefs is considered the champion. Many Scythians make cloaks to wear out of the scalps, sewing them together like sheepskin coats. Many flay the right hands of the enemy dead, fingernails and all, to make quiver-covers.

Thanks to Herodotus and later Greek and Roman writers, the Scythians and a few other barbarians on the fringes of the classical world have been better documented than many later tribes. In the centuries before the Common Era, hardly any of the tribes left written records, and the few traces that survive were mostly lists of kings without dates or historic events. Some of these peoples also left elaborate works of art buried in their graves. From these treasures, as well as from the accounts of contemporary visitors, comes all that history can tell about these remarkable people.

The word “barbarian” derives from the Greek *barbaros*, which originally meant “foreign,” a word the Greeks applied to anyone whose language was strange to them. The essential characteristic of these peoples was that they were outsiders; not only were they strangers in manner and dress, their behavior violated the Greco-Roman convictions about the way people should live.

Thus, the word took on negative connotations: *Barbaroi* were uncivilized nomads, crude and simple in their ways,

and above all, lacking in respect for their fellow men and women. The soldier of a civilized nation, having killed an enemy in battle, stripped him of everything of value; the barbarian warrior did the same, but also drank his blood and made trophies of his body parts.

Primitive social and political traditions were also marks of barbarians. The Greeks and Romans had stable communities, with governments ruling territories that had well-defined frontiers. The peoples who lived beyond the rim of the Greco-Roman world were organized in tribes headed by chieftains, and often wandered at will with no fixed periphery and few formal boundaries.

The leader of a group of tribes might warrant the title of king and enjoy royal honors. Among the Scythians, the greatest of these honors came at death. When one of their rulers passed away, they dug a square pit and set his body on a mattress within it. Then, wrote Herodotus, “they strangle and bury in the open space left about the body one of his concubines, his cupbearer, cook, groom, valet, messenger, and his horses, along with the first pick of all else he owned and his gold cups. . . . After a year has passed . . . they take fifty of the most suitable of the rest of his servants and strangle them along with fifty of the finest horses. They gut the bodies, stuff them with chaff, and sew them up. . . . They run a thick stake through the horses from tail to neck and plant them [on special stands so that] . . . their legs dangle in air. . . . They mount each of the fifty strangled youths on a horse . . . by driving through the corpses along the spine up to the neck a straight pole, leaving a part projecting below which they set into a socket in the stake through the horse. These horsemen they arrange in a circle around the tomb.”

Fortunately, more appealing items were also included in a Scythian royal burial. Herodotus mentioned gold cups and other treasures that barbarian kings took to their graves. The kings were dressed in elegant clothes and surrounded by their most prized possessions. In the fourth century BCE, at the hamlet of Solokha, on the left bank of the Dnieper River north of the Crimea, Scythians buried the body of a king adorned with a gold torque (a metal ring encircling his neck) and five gold bracelets on his arms, and covered him with a pall on which were sewn no fewer than 300 gold plaques. Also in this burial mound, known today as the Solokha kurgan, they placed a wooden cup set in gold, a sword with a gold handle, a gold comb, and seven silver vases.

The graves of common warriors usually contained a bow and several dozen arrows, a spear, and a javelin. It is clear that the Scythians believed the dead would need them to hunt and fight in the world beyond. Unfortunately, the materials used to make bows - wood, bone, and animal tendons - rot easily, and only a few out of the 5,000 or so known Scythian graves contained identifiable remnants of bows.

Herodotus visited the Scythians in their heyday when they had settled into a homeland after centuries of wandering. These Persian-speaking people hailed originally from somewhere in Siberia northeast of Persia, but they left this region to migrate south and west. Around 700 BCE, a significant portion of the tribe wended its way to southern Russia and settled there.

The smaller branch of the tribe was more adventurous. Its people made their way through Persia into the Near East, fighting, conquering, looting, and generally wreaking havoc. First, they joined forces with the Assyrians, who had then

regained their status as the lords of the area, ruling from their base in Nineveh, on the eastern bank of the Tigris in Upper Mesopotamia (now northern Iraq). Together, these ferocious allies conquered the Medes, an ancient Iranian people who lived south of the Caspian Sea. At one point, the Scythians raided their way through Palestine as far south as the borders of Egypt. Only by paying a huge tribute did Pharaoh Psamtik I (known to the Greeks as Psammeticus I) prevent the destruction and looting of the rich prize of Egypt. The Biblical prophet Jeremiah wrote of the Scythians: “They are always courageous, and their quivers are like an open grave. They will eat your harvest and bread, which your sons and daughters should eat. They will eat your sheep and oxen; they will eat your grapes and figs.”

After conquering the Medes, the Scythians turned around and joined their victims and the Babylonians in a new war to break Assyrian power. In 612 BCE, this triple alliance besieged, plundered, and razed the great city of Nineveh, the ruins of which still survive.

But the Medes eventually had enough of these volatile allies. Herodotus wrote that the king of the Medes invited the Scythians and Babylonians to a banquet, got them roaring drunk, and then massacred every one of them. Modern historians tell a less colorful tale: The Medes harassed the Scythians until they left Persia, at which point they chose to join their brethren in southern Russia.

Here the Scythians settled down, more or less. They turned the indigenous farmers into serfs and forced them to supply grain and other necessities. But Scythians were still nomads themselves, forever on the move, with the men on horseback and their families in ox-drawn wagons. Each cart,

roofed with a felt cover, was divided into two or three cubicles and housed a tightly-packed family.

Though the Scythians kept herds of cattle and sheep, the horse was the linchpin of their existence: It carried the men into battle and the hunt, and supplied some of their basic foodstuffs – cheese, dried curd, and kumys, the national drink, all made from mare's milk.

Historians used to think that life among the Scythians focused almost exclusively on the males – that women were subordinate. But they now believe that women fought alongside the men. In fact, one-third of all Scythian graves uncovered to date contained the bodies of women who had been buried with knives, daggers, and other tools of war and had suffered injuries similar to the men.

By all accounts, the Scythians loved to fight. Warfare provided their most glorious moments: Victory in battle brought recognition and rewards to the survivors, honorable burial to the slain, and a joyous celebration fueled by kumys to all.

The Scythian warriors were mounted archers whose forte was galloping headlong at an enemy, shooting a barrage of arrows, and then dashing back to safety. The horses they rode were ponies – small but tough, agile, and fast.

The Scythian bow was extremely stiff and powerful, its wooden core laminated with horn and sinew, so the archers could shoot arrows with high velocity. The composite bow could be weakened by moisture, so it was carried in a special case slung from the belt and was taken out only for battle or the chase. It was about two and a half feet long; great strength was required to string and shoot it.

The arrow used by the Scythians was made of reed or a thin birch branch. The heads were iron, bronze, or sometimes bone, and they varied in size and shape depending on the prey. Scythian warriors carried between thirty and 150 arrows into battle and could shoot as many as twelve arrows per minute. Sadly, no complete example is known to survive; only decayed fragments have been found in graves. We know, however, that its length was two-thirds of the bow and that the quiver could be closed with a metal-clasped buckle. Early Scythian tombs yield many bronze, bone, and even gold quiver buckles.

It was by killing an enemy in battle and wearing the badge of his scalp that a Scythian proved his manhood. The more seasoned veterans carved drinking cups from the skulls of especially worthy opponents.

Since a Scythian spent a large part of his time on horseback, he dressed appropriately, wearing a close-fitting, sleeved tunic cinched around the waist, soft leather boots, and tight trousers. The trousers drew puzzled comments from the Greeks, who never wore them, preferring tunics or robes - a Scythian striding down the street of a Greek town created a great stir. The Scythians also wore leather jackets, often trimmed with fur, and peaked hoods.

The Scythians had a ranking class of nobles, and the clothes they wore on momentous occasions were sumptuously decorated with embroidery. They adorned themselves with glittering gold jewelry - headbands, pendants, earrings (in one ear for men, both ears for women), bracelets, and rings - and feasted, drinking from golden chalices and spearing their food with ivory-handled knives. In one especially rich tomb, the Scythians buried a two-foot-tall jug designed to hold kumys. Made of electrum, an alloy of silver and gold, it

depicted a pair of young men with lassos rounding up grazing ponies.

If not the first mounted warriors in history, the Scythians were probably the earliest to tame the wild pony of the Eurasian steppes and master the art of horsemanship. Indeed, all of the tribes scattered across the steppes were natural, gifted horsemen. Aggressive and free, they felt superior to men on foot, who, in turn, regarded them with a mixture of fear and awe.

The steppe riders outfitted their horses handsomely, with colorful saddles, harnesses festooned with beautifully carved wooden plaques, and elaborate masks. This finery, faultlessly crafted and typically decorated with animal figures, also went with them to the grave.

Although kumys was the drink of choice of the Scythians, contact with neighboring Greeks generated a taste for wine, especially among the nobles. Drinking from a bowl full of wine was the major event at an annual get-together in honor of those warriors who had a scalp to their credit. Those who had not yet won this token of manhood were not permitted to drink and were pushed aside, shamed and ignored. Those who had collected many scalps were allowed to help themselves to two drinks at a time. The food at these celebrations was usually horsemeat or mutton stewed in a huge copper cauldron.

The longest festivities were those that preceded a royal funeral - forty days of continuous feasting, according to Herodotus. After the funeral, the revelers disassociated themselves from death by washing their heads and “hot airing” their bodies. Herodotus said this ritual began with building a tepee-like tent in which they installed a brazier full of hot coals. They then crawled into the tent clutching a

handful of hemp, placed it on the stones, and sniffed the fumes. They "get such pleasure from this 'hot-airing' that they howl out loud," added Herodotus. (You should assume that the hemp was, indeed, cannabis.)

Death and its rites were a key aspect of the Scythians' religion. They worshiped as many as seven deities, the most important being the goddess Tabiti, often depicted presiding over the administering of oaths or the anointing of chieftains. Sometimes she is portrayed as a winged female accompanied by her sacred beasts, a raven and a dog. The stag was also a sacred animal, perhaps a totem or symbol of the tribe. None of the deities had temples or shrines, and the Scythians raised altars to only one god, Ares, the god of war. They would gather at a given place to worship, perform their ceremonies, and then abandon the site, selecting some other spot for the next convocation.

The Scythians had no priests. Their only formal clerical body was an order of prophets, who were regularly called in by the king to explain matters of great importance, such as when the king fell ill. The standard procedure was for him to summon three prophets to reveal the cause of his illness; their standard reply, according to Herodotus, was that a certain person, whose name they disclosed, had "sworn falsely by the royal hearth," the most solemn oath a Scythian could take. Of course, the accused would deny the charge. The only redress was to summon half a dozen additional prophets: If they upheld the judgment of the original trio, the accused was beheaded; if they proclaimed the man's innocence, the first three were burned alive as false prophets. Prophecy could be a dangerous business.

As time went on, the Scythians had increasing contact with other peoples, especially the Greeks, who from about 650 BCE began establishing colonies around the Black Sea. The

two cultures maintained a brisk trade, with the Scythians exchanging cattle, furs, and grain for Greek wine and other wares.

This cultural exchange is plainly visible in the design and decoration of Scythian jewelry, armor, vases, cups, tack for horses, and other objects found in Scythian tombs. The earlier pieces, made in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, reflect mainly Scythian taste, especially their predilection for stylized figures of animals; the revered stag was a particular favorite. Figures of panthers, stags, goats, and other animals in various poses were often paired with more exotic or mythical animals. One gold artifact found in the Caucasus Mountains features two griffins tearing apart a horse.

Around the fifth century BCE, Scythian artifacts began to show a more pronounced Greek influence.

The scenes portrayed aspects of Scythian life - a Scythian stringing a bow or in combat, or helping a wounded comrade - but the treatment was typically Greek. Sometimes the scenes, as well as the treatment, were Grecian, such as those featuring the head of Athena or a battle between Greeks and Persians. The best are clearly the work of Greek artisans; the less sophisticated objects could have been made by Scythian craftsmen trained under Greek masters.

Scythian assimilation, however, was largely limited to the arts. Though they were in close contact with the Greeks, their lifestyle remained unique to their separate culture. And over the centuries, the Greeks grew increasingly sophisticated, while the Scythians clung stubbornly to their nomadic bands or primitive villages. Herodotus tells the story of an exception, a Scythian king named Scyllas, the

progeny of a Scythian father and a woman from a Greek colony on the coast of what is today Rumania. Scyllas had an irresistible craving for all things Greek, and over time, he worked out what he thought was an ideal solution: He set up a secret household, complete with a wife, in the closest Greek town, where he would sneak off to spend a month or more living less like a primitive Scythian and more like a refined Greek. He went so far as to get drunk with the Greek mobs celebrating the festival of the wine god Dionysus. This was too much for his proud subjects, who upon learning of his duplicity, hunted him down and beheaded him.

The Scythians held the niche they had carved out in history for well over half a millennium, as late as the second century CE. Then they succumbed to their eastern neighbors, the Sarmatians, a large confederation of Iranian people with whom they shared a common language and lifestyle. The Sarmatians, too, were nomads who lived on horseback and carried their families in felt-covered wagons, and subsisted on game, horsemeat, and mare's milk. They wore the same long trousers and soft leather boots, and according to Strabo, the Greek geographer who observed their habits in the first century CE, they had nothing but contempt for those who went on foot. Also like the Scythians, Sarmatian women fought alongside the men and fought savagely. Their distant ancestors may have been the inspiration for the Amazons of Greek mythology.

As they moved westward off the steppe, the Sarmatians gained another advantage. They gave up the small, fast pony and use of bows and arrows, and instead covered themselves and their new bulkier mounts with a carapace of heavy armor, using either long lances or swords so big they had to be gripped with both hands. This was an example of a rare but real phenomenon: the advanced culture copying

barbarians. The Sarmatians, in fact, were precursors of the late medieval European knight.

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3

"THEY DESCEND TO SACRIFICING EVEN THE INNOCENT"

THE GERMANIC TRIBES

In sharp contrast to the Asian origin of the Scythians, Sarmatians, Medes, and Gutians, most of the tribes that were to dominate and shape Europe came from the north of the continent. By the sixth century BCE, when Rome became a republic and began its expansion, the principal barbarian marauders were moving south from Scandinavia through an area the Romans called Germania, so they became known as Germanic tribes. Chief among them were the Angles, Celts, Franks, Goths, Saxons, and Vandals.

The Roman legions clashed with all of them in the course of subduing Gaul, but in the early centuries, the biggest threat to the expanding Empire was posed by the Celts.

The Celts were one of the earliest tribes to move out of their Scandinavian homeland - and the most aggressive in seizing territory. By the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, they occupied a swath of Europe that reached from the upper Danube in Germany to Portugal and Spain, with outriders in Britain and Ireland.

These people, who roamed as far as Asia Minor and the Near East, grew powerful enough in the fourth century BCE, to challenge the Scythians and the Sarmatians on Russia's steppe. While they didn't actually occupy territory, by about 300 BCE, Celtic tribes had some sort of grip on 800,000 square miles of land – an area larger than France, Germany, Austria, Poland, Italy, and the Iberian Peninsula combined.

In Rome's early years, the natural barrier of the Alps protected Italy from the Celtic marauders. But by the fifth century BCE, a horde of Celts from Gaul had crossed the mountains and taken over all of northern Italy as far as Tuscany. About 390 BCE, they drove farther south under the warlord Brennus and routed a powerful Roman army that

tried to stop them a dozen miles north of Rome. They sacked the city.

But some defenders clung stubbornly to their post on the Capitoline Hill (where legend says a gaggle of geese sacred to the goddess Juno alerted the Romans to a night attack by the Celts). Eventually, Roman reinforcements arrived to drive the raiders away. Roman soldiers later drove the Celts from Italy and most of Gaul.

But the attack left its mark. Rome had to fight several battles to subdue rebellious allies, including Etruscans, who had been emboldened by the humiliating invasion.

The Celts reached their greatest territorial expansion a little more than a century later when a restless group of Celtic Gauls, pushing down the Danube valley, burst into Greece. They were halted just short of the celebrated sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, where the precious offerings to the Oracle would have made rich pickings for the invaders.

Three tribes kept moving south.

Bypassing Greek centers, they smashed their way to softer targets in Asia Minor, where they set up a state of their own called Galatia (from Galatoi, the Greek word for Gauls) and spent most of their time pillaging their Greek neighbors. (Aristotle portrayed them as an example of foolhardy fearlessness; other classical writers labeled the Celts boastful, “unbearable in victory,” and vain.) Eventually, by about 230 BCE, one of the Greek rulers in Asia Minor mustered a strong enough army to hold them in check.

After that, these tribes gradually blended into the native culture, speaking Greek in addition to Celtic and slowly giving up their traditional ways in favor of the Hellenic mode of life. Some of them became early converts to Christianity,

as evidenced by St. Paul's letters to the Galatians in the New Testament.

But the vast majority of Celts in the western part of the ancient world were absorbed into Roman rather than Greek civilization. Those in northern Italy succumbed to the Roman armies as early as 200 BCE. Contact with their Roman neighbors soon knocked off their roughest edges, including the practice of human sacrifice, and they settled into villages and learned better farming techniques.

Many Celts, however, continued to resist the expanding empire. Julius Caesar fought the Celts of Gaul for seven years, from 58 to 51 BCE. Caesar, though already one of Rome's most powerful politicians, was penniless, and the quickest way to amass a fortune in his day was through booty from conquered enemies. With this goal in mind, he got himself appointed commander-in-chief of a long-term expedition against the Gauls. Along with the wealth he sought, he won the fame that let him seize control as dictator of all Rome.

Like any shrewd general, Caesar studied his enemies carefully, and his eye for telling details was as keen as Herodotus's. And as with most "civilized" observers, Caesar was struck by the foe's barbarity. "All the Gauls," he wrote in his memoir of the campaign, "are totally dedicated to religious practices, and that is why any who fall sick or are involved in battle and danger use, or vow to use, human beings for their sacrificial victims. . . . It is their belief that, unless one human life is rendered for another, the immortal gods' anger cannot be soothed. They hold state sacrifices of this kind. Some Gauls have colossal human likenesses made of wicker whose arms and legs they fill with live men, set them on fire, and the men die engulfed in the flames. It is their belief that the immortal gods prefer the sacrificing of

people caught in theft or highway robbery or other crimes, but since this source of supply does not fill the need, they descend to sacrificing even the innocent."

As Caesar noted, the Celtic gods required a lot of sacrifices, performed by a variety of gruesome methods. For certain gods, burning would not do; the victims had to be hanged or drowned. A beautifully decorated silver bowl of the first century BCE, found at Gundestrup in Denmark, depicts one of these drownings. Such cauldrons were sacred vessels to the Celts, used in ritual sacrifices to catch the blood of human victims. The Gundestrup bowl is the most magnificent Celtic cauldron ever found - a supreme work of silversmithing and a treasure that may well have been the most precious sacred object in the entire Celtic world in the first century BCE.

At other rites, priests called Druids filled cauldrons with potions made from mistletoe and other plants believed to bring health and fertility. The Druids were especially powerful since they were responsible for dispensing both law and religion. From commoners to chieftains of mighty tribes, anyone who had a quarrel brought it to the Druids. The parties had to abide by the verdict or face exclusion from all sacrifices; if not a death sentence, this penalty was nearly as harsh, since any who disobeyed became ritually unclean and were shunned by the community.

Studying for the Druidhood took years, in some cases as many as twenty. Acolytes spent this time memorizing sacred verses, a laborious task made necessary by the Druids' taboo against putting anything in writing. Like all barbarian peoples, the Celts had been illiterate in their early years. By Caesar's time, they had learned to write using the Greek alphabet, but the Druids insisted on following the age-old tradition.

Celtic deities were as fearsome and strange as the sacrifices made to them. One powerful god, Tarvos Trigaranos, had the attributes of a bull. Another, Cernunnos, the Celtic god of fertility, life, animals, wealth, and the underworld, was horned. Badb, a war goddess, could assume the shape of a raven or crow and use her wailing cries to create confusion among the enemy in battle or to predict the death of a prominent person. A goddess named Mórríghan, who sometimes appears in Irish literature as a trio of sisters, may be the forerunner of Morgan le Fay, the magic-working sister of the Celtic king, Arthur, who in one version of the legend tried to kill him.

The Celts' places of worship were as forbidding as their deities and practices. The oak tree was sacred to them, and their preferred sanctuaries were dark groves hidden in deep forests. One near Marseilles, says the Roman poet Lucan, stood amid trees that "from ancient times on had never been touched by human hand. Their interlaced branches, closing out the sun above, made the air dark and the shadows gelid. . . . Here gods were worshiped with barbaric rites; the altars were heaped with fell offerings, and every tree had been ritually cleansed with human gore."

The "fell offerings" were human heads, an object of worship for the Celts, who displayed severed heads not only on altars but on the facades of temples. These temples were simple structures of wood with thatched roofs, encircled by verandas used for processions or sacred offerings. Some of the heads were merely symbols carved in stone or wood, but a good number were the actual heads of enemies slain in battle. This custom appalled the Romans, who assumed that the practice rose out of a sheer thirst for gore.

In fact, the taking of heads of slain enemies sprang from deep religious conviction. Celts believed that a person's

head was his soul - the center of emotions and of life itself – and that even after the body had died, a severed head retained its life-force. Thus, when a hero took the heads of his enemies, he took their power as well. And nailed above the gates of a town or over the door of a warrior's house, heads brought good luck and kept evil at bay.

But sacred groves were not just a place of worship and sacrifice for these fearsome men and women. In addition to war booty, the Celts deposited bulk gold and silver there. Certain lakes were also deemed sacred, and the Celts hid treasure in them as well; it was considered safer resting on the lake bottom than in a grove. After the Romans conquered Gaul, they auctioned off the sacred lakes, and many buyers are said to have hauled up masses of hammered silver as big as millstones. A Greek writer of the first century BCE, Posidonius, reported that the gold and silver bullion in the lakes and groves around what is today Toulouse was worth 15,000 talents. (In ancient Greece, one silver talent would pay a month's salary for the 170 oarsmen needed to propel a trireme - a sum not even kings and emperors could often afford.)

Treaure aside, the Celts' main goal in life, like most of the tribes, was to win battles. "The whole race is war-mad," declared Strabo, the Greek geographer. The Celts fought with spears and heavy iron swords, protecting themselves with long wooden shields; chieftains sometimes wore helmets as tall as fifteen inches high. Some didn't bother with armor at all: They fought nude, convinced that their nakedness kept them safe from harm.

Young men were required by law to keep in good shape and to maintain a slender figure. Their girth was measured by a belt of a certain length; those who had developed a potbelly

and could not fasten the belt around them had to pay a fine.

As with the Scythians and the Sarmatians, Celtic women fought alongside the men. One Roman historian reports that "a whole troop of strangers cannot take on any Gaul in a fight if his wife is with him. Much the stronger, fire in her eye, gnashing her teeth, she will begin to throw around those huge heavy arms of hers, and adding kicks from her feet, deliver blows like a catapult."

Both Greeks and Romans were struck by the dauntlessness of Celtic women, who would rather kill their children than see them enslaved by an enemy. Strabo tells of a Celtic woman hired along with a gang of men to dig ditches, who "feeling pains, went off a little way from where she was working, gave birth, and came right back to the job in order not to lose her pay."

Another chronicler describes Queen Boudica, who led the British Celts in a revolt against Rome in CE 61, as "huge in body, absolutely terrifying in appearance, a deadly fierce look in her eye, a hoarse voice and a mass of hair, redder than red, down to her buttocks." The sight of tall, fair-skinned, blond or red-haired Celts, especially the husky Celtic women, obviously gave pause to the small, dark Romans.

Even Julius Caesar had difficulty subduing the Celts.

His two incursions into Britain were ultimately unsuccessful, and accounts of his campaigns against the Gauls on the mainland provide ample proof of the Celts' indomitable fighting spirit. Their finest hour came in 52 BCE when Caesar had just about completed the pacification of Gaul.

Suddenly, a revolt blazed up throughout the land, led by a charismatic young Celt named Vercingetorix.

When Germanic tribes north of the Rhine began to push into Gaul, Caesar hired Celtic mercenaries to drive them back. Vercingetorix was happy to join in the fight against invaders who wanted to take his own tribes' land, but when Caesar began to impose Roman law, treating the Gauls as a conquered people, Vercingetorix kicked off the revolt.

Born a noble and trained to lead, Vercingetorix cut an imposing figure in a full suit of armor. But what counted far more than his looks and his pedigree were his unyielding will, his determination to resist the Romans at whatever cost, and his gift for rallying the fractious tribes of Gallic Celts, who had previously been more interested in fighting each other than the invaders.

For the first time, Vercingetorix united the Celts in a single cause and even managed to enlist some non-Celtic Gauls in his alliance. Luckily, the young leader was an able commander as well as a charismatic patriot. For the best part of a year, he held his own against the man considered to be one of the great military geniuses in history; he even managed to defeat Caesar's troops in a major battle at Gergovia in south-central France.

For a moment, it looked as if Vercingetorix might win the game. But after heavy losses to both sides as the rebels pursued Caesar's retreating armies, Vercingetorix took refuge with his forces at Alesia, a walled Celtic town in Burgundy some thirty-five miles northwest of Dijon. Considering the place impregnable, Vercingetorix locked himself in with 80,000 men and called for help from all over Gaul. With probably little more than half that number, Caesar laid siege, encircling the wall with fortifications, only

to be surrounded by more than 250,000 Gauls answering Vercingetorix's call. But the Roman legions' steely discipline and Caesar's inspired generalship saved the day; seeing his troops surrounded, Caesar donned his famous red battle cloak and rode to lead them himself. He not only kept Vercingetorix from breaking out but smashed the Gauls who were coming to the rescue.

To Caesar, Vercingetorix was a barbarian. Yet what happened next proved that the civilized Roman could be even more savage than his opponent.

To save the life of his followers, Vercingetorix gallantly offered to give himself up. Plutarch reports the scene in his *Life of Caesar*. The young Celt "dressed himself in his finest suit of armor, mounted his horse, and rode out through the gates [of Alesia]. He executed a complete circle around where Caesar was sitting, dismounted, stripped off his armor, and seated himself at Caesar's feet. There he remained motionless until handed over to be held under guard for the victory parade."

As it turned out, Vercingetorix's noble sacrifice was in vain; his men were either massacred or enslaved as a lesson to other Gallic rebels. And Caesar's victory parade, a formal Roman Triumph, did not take place until five years later. During that time, Vercingetorix languished in a Roman jail. Then, after his captors paraded him, together with an Egyptian princess, a Tunisian prince, and other trophies of Rome's unconquerable might, Caesar put the Celtic hero to death, probably by strangulation.

By 50 BCE, Caesar had completed his conquest of Gaul.

On his heels came battalions of Roman administrators, soldiers, colonists, and tradesmen. The result was that Gaul

became the most thoroughly Romanized of all the areas under Rome's domination. The Gauls gave up human sacrifice and headhunting, and their gods fused with Roman deities. The Celtic languages gave way to Latin, Druid edicts to Roman law, and Celtic villages to Roman-style towns complete with forum, baths, and amphitheaters.

One group of Celts never had to confront the Roman legions. For several centuries before the Common Era, groups of Celts made their way from continental Europe to the shores of Ireland and gradually took over the verdant, fertile land.

Ireland was by no means unfamiliar to the Greeks and Romans. They knew the names of the Celtic tribes that lived there and the names of their larger towns. They were aware that Ireland was extraordinarily green, as reported by Pomponius Mela, a first-century geographer. Solinus, a geographer of the third century CE, even knew that there were no snakes on the island. But for whatever reason, Rome never sent its legions to conquer this remote corner of the ancient world. Spared the depredations of Roman conquest, the Celts there flourished.

The island was a patchwork of more than 100 small kingdoms, split into four large regional alliances that were often at odds with each other. Irish sagas tell of a heroic age, dating roughly from the second century BCE to the fourth century CE, when warriors in chariots battled over land and women or simply for sport. A warrior's boast, from the tale of a feud between the kingdoms of Ulster and Connacht, sums up the spirit of the era: "I have never been a day without having slain a Connachtman. . . ."

All the Celts shared a common culture, united by language, religion, character, and traditions. As willing to fight as they

were, the Irish Celts relished language, sentiment, and eloquence as much as they did a sturdy right arm. On occasion, they were even ready to put down their weapons in the midst of a battle to listen to a poet. Under Irish law, the penalty for harming a poet was the same as for injuring a king. A Greek writer noted that "They speak in riddles . . . hinting at things and leaving much to be understood" – a mischievous trait not unknown in modern Ireland.

No strong man ever rose up to weld the far-flung Celtic tribes of Ireland into an empire; they acted independently, and when the time came, embarked on conquests of their own. As Rome's hold on Britain began to weaken, the Irish Celts were quick to take advantage of the situation: By the third century CE, they were moving into Wales. Two centuries later, a tribe of Celts called the Scotti settled in northern Britain and gave their name to Scotland. But at that point, Rome was about to fall.

Back on the Continent, another tribe of Celts was coming into its own: the Franks, who were developing their own language, customs, and identity. This tribe originally concentrated along the banks of the Rhine in the region of present-day Mainz, but soon pushed west into Belgium and along the North Sea coast and the English Channel, preying on foreign ships and raiding the coasts of England and Gaul.

Like all the barbarian tribes, the Franks were formidable fighters. They took their name from the tomahawk-like battle axe, the *francisca*, that their warriors threw with lethal accuracy. In the third century CE, they began seizing bits of Roman territory. The Romans, preoccupied with larger problems, first ignored the losses and finally legitimized them through a treaty with the invading tribes in CE 287. The Franks then moved into northeastern Gaul and

began enlisting in the Roman army, where they would become the largest non-Roman force in the western legions.

As the centuries passed, while the empire faded and died and the barbarian tribes came to dominate Europe, the Franks concentrated in Gaul and renamed it France.

A third major Germanic tribe was the Saxons. They took their name from the *seax*, a distinctive knife they used, and they also emerged in the second or third century CE along the North Sea coast. With the powerful Franks already established to their south, they turned westward to expand their territory. But they joined the Franks in seafaring raids, and eventually, with the closely related Angles and Jutes, the Saxons began displacing the Celts in southeastern England.

Having had little contact with Romans and their culture, the Saxons were the least Romanized of the Germanic tribes. Their forays were worrisome to the Roman occupiers of Britain, who built forts to repel the raiders along a stretch of the English Channel they called the *Litus Saxonicum*, the Saxon Shore. In the end, however, the Saxons prevailed: In CE 410, with the barbarian hordes threatening the Eternal City itself, the Romans withdrew all their legions from Britain, and the Anglo-Saxon infiltration proceeded unhindered.

Yet another Germanic tribe originally from Scandinavia, the Goths, would play the major role in squeezing the decaying Empire and sacking Rome itself. They developed their own warrior culture, marauding mainly in the area between the Danube and the Black Sea. By peaceable agreement with the Romans around CE 275, the Visigoths, or western Goths, settled along the Danube River in the Carpathian Mountains, while their kinsmen, the Ostrogoths, settled to

the east in the Black Sea region. Like all Germanic tribes, the Goths were formidable fighters, tough enough to fend off the Romans' attempts to conquer them.

When Julius Caesar first faced these tribes in Gaul and tales began to circulate in the legions about the size, strength, and ferocity of the Gothic warriors, Caesar's soldiers were impressed enough to start drawing up their wills. Although Caesar ultimately managed to rout all the German armies he faced, he too was struck by their fierceness and love of battle.

"[Goths] spend all their time in hunting and war," he wrote. "From the time they are little children, they exercise at enduring labor and hardship." Young Goths, he reported, postponed sexual relations until they were twenty; they were convinced that this helped "their growth, strength, and sinews." War was the be-all and end-all of a Gothic male's existence. One tribe did not even permit a youth to shave until he had killed a man in battle. According to Tacitus, who in CE 98 published an essay on the Germans, "Many young aristocrats, if their native state is stagnating in a long peace . . . of their own accord seek out tribes that are carrying on some war."

To motivate themselves to fight their hardest and never back down, Tacitus added, Goths fought with their families nearby, so they "could hear the shrieks of the women, the wailing of the infants" - a pressing form of encouragement.

Like the Celts, Goths favored gloomy groves as the setting for their religious rites. They, too, practiced human sacrifice. One tribe kept a sacred chariot in a grove for their invisible goddess to ride in. Afterward, the chariot had to be ritually cleansed in a sacred lake by a gang of slaves, who, when they had finished the job, were drowned in the lake.

Prisoners of war, too, were often used as sacrifices on the altars.

Yet in important ways, the Goths were different from the Celts. The Celts were efficient farmers, while the Goths left their farms in the hands of women, the weak, and the elderly. Celts were comfortable living in villages and towns; Goths preferred to live apart from their neighbors.

Another key difference: The Celts did not esteem their women, aside from their value as fighters, while the Goths treated theirs with great respect. According to Tacitus, the Gothic male "believes that there is in women something holy, some ability to foresee; he never scorns their advice or disregards their replies . . . [Goths] are almost alone among the barbarians to be content with a single wife." It was the Gothic husband, not the wife, who brought a dowry to the marriage. In return, husbands insisted upon strict chastity. If a man caught his wife in adultery, he cut off her hair, stripped her naked, and flogged her.

The Goths also set the tone for other Germanic tribes that emerged after Caesar's time, occupying parts of Gaul and eastern Europe - sometimes moving off to seize lands of their own but mostly blending into the European mix. These included the Vandals, the Lombards, the Allemani, and many more. To the Romans, they were all Germans and were viewed with a mixture of fear and contempt.

In CE 9, a group of German tribes ambushed a powerful Roman army in a thick forest and destroyed it. After that disaster, Romans were unwilling to pursue the Germans when they retreated. Instead, the Romans concentrated on keeping these formidable warriors from coming after them. The emperors ordered a series of fortifications built - in some places an actual wall - along the frontier to fence off

Rome’s enticingly rich lands and towns from barbarian territory.

This was a signal that the empire had turned from expansion to defense, from youthful aggression to protection of assets. But the wall wasn’t built to close off contact. Roman traders circulated freely in barbarian territory, exchanging bronzeware and silverware - bowls, cups, dishes - for amber, hides, furs, and slaves. Over time, the Germans became aware that, over the border, life was fuller and easier than in their gloomy woodlands. What’s more, the Roman government was willing to pay for the Germans greatest pleasure - fighting.

Roman citizens, whose penchant for peace during these years was nearly as avid as the Germans’ lust for war, were increasingly reluctant to serve as soldiers, and Roman commanders were forever on the lookout for likely recruits. Germanic youths flooded south to sign up and were so welcome that by the fourth century CE they were the backbone of Rome’s armed forces. The eastern emperor’s elite guard at Constantinople was Germanic, as was most of the officer staff, including its generals. So, when the Huns of Asia began pressing from the north and east and forced the great southward migration of the Goths in about CE 375 – a movement that would tip the Roman Empire into its final stages - the troops opposing them were largely their own kinsmen.

Roman civilization was both attacked and defended by barbarians.

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"THE FIGHT GREW FIERCE, CONFUSED, MONSTROUS, UNRELENTING"

ROME'S SLOW DEMISE

The Visigoths' sacking of Rome didn't mean the death of the Roman Empire.

That would take most of the fifth century CE, including turbulent wars, dramatic shifts in the balance of power - and a cast of characters including Attila the Hun, Justinian the Great, and Gaiseric, the crippled son of a slave who became the wily king of the Vandals and the Metternich of his day.

After Alaric's death in 410, soon after his looting of Rome, his army of Visigoths - now under the command of his brother-in-law, Ataulf - left Italy to focus their destructive attention on France and Spain.

Ataulf was a resourceful leader who took a larger view than Alaric had of the world and of his kingly role in it. Like Alaric, Ataulf was deferential to the empire even as he was attacking it. Also like Alaric, he assumed that it would be impossible for a German to take the throne and the title of Roman emperor. His plan was to marry the current emperor Honorius's sister, Galla Placidia, and to sire an emperor by her; he was clearly aware that Honorius had no imperial heir of his own - and was unlikely to produce one.

Ataulf brazenly told Honorius that he wished to become an ally and marry Placidia. The emperor rejected the offer, but his headstrong sister accepted. The wedding was celebrated in 414, with Ataulf consenting to don Roman robes for the occasion. After the marriage, Visigoth warriors fought in Spain as Roman allies, and in return were legally granted territory in southwestern Gaul, land they had already begun to settle.

But the Visigoths suffered a setback: In 415, Ataulf was murdered by a treacherous follower, leaving no heir to

either his crown or the imperial throne. The results, however, turned out to be less than disastrous. Honorius chose a new brother-in-law more to his liking - a general with a Roman pedigree - and gave him the hand of the grief-stricken Placidia. Despite her reluctance to remarry, Placidia recovered from her sorrows and enjoyed her new life as the center of court intrigues at Ravenna; later, with equal gusto, she looked after the empire for twenty-five years as regent for her feckless son, Valentinian III. As for the Visigoths, they prospered under Ataulf's successors, expanded throughout southern Gaul, and began overflowing into Spain.

As the Goths settled down in Gaul, their presence caused many dislocations, but fewer hardships than the Gallo-Romans feared. One of the biggest problems was the redistribution of land. The Goths made huge territorial claims and justified them by invoking an old Roman tradition that allowed the military protectors of a region to appropriate one-third to two-thirds of the land - or the produce from those "thirds." The Visigoths naturally chose their thirds from the richest land, so their principal victims were the small minority of great landowners. To these aristocrats, civilization as they had known it came to an end. But the great majority of Gallo-Romans, with little land, didn't lose much.

The Goths' system of land settlement had its plus side. In taking up residence on their thirds, the warriors distributed themselves widely throughout southern Gaul and abandoned their local tribal organization, relying on Roman bureaucrats to handle administrative tasks that were too perplexing for barbarians. Goths and Gallo-Romans everywhere rubbed elbows in the course of their daily routines. This familiarity blossomed into mutual respect.

The practical Goths also adopted Gallic farming methods and the Latin tongue - so quickly that in some areas the Goths' Germanic dialect disappeared entirely within two generations. In turn, many Gallo-Romans came to emulate the new barbarian aristocracy. Men gave up their togas in favor of trousers and abandoned their refined manners. Men and women alike made a vogue of the Visigoths' garish jewelry. This cultural give-and-take sometimes stretched to intermarriage, even though that was legally forbidden.

There was only one thing standing between the complete integration of the two peoples: religious prejudice.

The Goths' Arian Christian faith – ironically, with Roman roots - was heresy to most Gallo-Roman Catholics. Despite the general mood of tolerance, religious differences caused outbreaks of violence in southern Gaul. And in Spain, which was to become the Visigoths' final home, their Arianism was met with even less tolerance by the militant Catholics. The results were frequent periods of mutual persecution that kept the two peoples divided for well over a century.

The Visigoths' push into Spain was part of another round of toppling tribal dominos. Pressure from the Huns to the northeast was pushing the Ostrogoths to follow the Visigoths into Italy; the Visigoths moved into southern Gaul, where the Franks were trying to push them south. But much of Spain in the 420s was the home of the Vandals, who had arrived in 409 after crossing the Rhine three years earlier.

The Vandals, a hitherto inconspicuous tribe, began to make major waves when, under pressure from the local Romans and the Visigoths, they decided to move on to the richer provinces of Roman North Africa. And in 428, they elected

as their king the extraordinary man who would lead them there.

The new Vandal king was Gaiseric, the illegitimate son of a king by one of his slave girls. But he had been raised as an equal to the king's son and heir. Gaiseric's half-brother duly succeeded to the throne; but when he died not long afterward, Gaiseric had built such a reputation as a ruthless, guileful warrior that he had no trouble taking the crown.

Gaiseric proved to be a gifted conspirator and a genius at political maneuvering. For fifty years, Gaiseric's spider web of treaties snarled the plans of Roman diplomats and Germanic kings alike - always to the Vandals' advantage.

In 429, Gaiseric ferried his whole tribe across the Strait of Gibraltar and led them east along the African coast. One by one, the gleaming Roman cities with their bulging granaries fell to the hungry Vandals. The city of Hippo, in modern-day Algeria, also fell despite its defense by the famous bishop, Augustine, who had come to Africa after years of missionary work in Britain and Germany. His monumental book, *The City of God,* served as the theological cornerstone of the Early Middle Ages, and he would become a saint. But Augustine died in Hippo during the fourteen-month Vandal siege, and the city fell into barbarian hands.

The Vandal conquest of North Africa took a decade to complete. Mopping-up operations were still going on when Gaiseric turned restlessly to a new project: He built a swift, well-armed fleet and embarked on a lucrative career of piracy in the Mediterranean Sea.

The Vandals' pattern of settlement in North Africa in some ways resembled that of the Visigoths in southern Gaul. The

Vandals, too, carved out big estates and made their homes among the Romans. They too left administrative chores to Roman bureaucrats. But the relations of the Arian Vandals with the Catholic inhabitants were strained, at best. Gaiseric barely managed to hold the animosities in check. And under his successors, prejudice erupted into violence. The Vandals out-persecuted the Roman majority - and slaughtered scores of Catholics.

Gratuitous cruelty was only one symptom of the Vandals' swift degradation after Gaiseric's reign. The warriors, seduced by the luxuries their rich land supplied, grew weak, corrupt, and disorganized - and succumbed quickly when their kingdom was invaded by an army from the Eastern Roman Empire in 533. Soon afterward, the Vandals disappeared as a distinct people, blending into the highly mixed local population. They left little behind but lingering bitterness; today, their name is synonymous with wanton destruction.

The Vandals' only real contribution to history was their unplanned but strategic role in the dismemberment of the western empire. Their initial disruptive thrust through Gaul and into Spain in 406-409 weakened Rome's grip on its outlying provinces, facilitating the advances of the Franks and the Saxons from the north. Then, as conquerors of North Africa, the Vandals cut off the Empire's grain supply at will. This created critical food shortages, which in turn curtailed Roman counterattacks and thus helped all the Germans, especially the Visigoths, to secure their foothold in the Roman provinces. In addition, the dying Western Empire was kept off balance by Gaiseric's pesky pirate fleet and his double-dealing diplomacy.

But the empire wasn't dead yet. In 434, Gaiseric and the other Germanic kings found themselves facing a formidable

new adversary. Flavius Aetius, a Roman aristocrat, took a firm hold on the reins of the Roman Empire as the strongman for Placidia's incompetent son, the emperor Valentinian III.

For more than two decades, against all odds, Aetius slowed the erosion of imperial power. Like his predecessor, the half-Vandal, Stilicho, Aetius was widely admired yet constantly viewed with suspicion – and in this case, with good reason. High-handed and utterly unscrupulous, Aetius thought nothing of ceding an entire province to the Vandals in return for their support. Since he had vast holdings in Gaul, including some of the best lands not yet seized by barbarians, Romans believed he was acting in his own interests at the empire's expense. Yet in practice, what was good for Aetius was usually good for the empire. Though his motives could hardly be called patriotic, historians have called him "the last of the Romans."

In his battles against the barbarians, Aetius relied on the old Roman strategy of pitting one enemy against another. But in doing so, he succeeded in escalating the conflict and risking disaster by inviting a dragon into his house. To put down a revolt in western Gaul, Aetius tapped Rome's gold to hire the fierce Huns of Central Europe, led by their brutally efficient commander, Attila.

At Aetius's command, the Huns inflicted a crushing defeat on the Burgundians, a well-organized Germanic people who were expanding along the west bank of the Rhine. With particular relish, Aetius commissioned the Hunnish horsemen to harass his favorite enemies, the Visigoths. To the Gallo-Romans, the new allies might well have seemed more threatening than their known enemies, but Aetius continued to nurture his business relationship with the Huns.

Attila himself was the principal cause for alarm. The Hunnish king was a hardened Mongol known to his men and enemies alike as *flagellum Dei*, "the scourge of God." His power over his people was absolute. Here is Gibbon's description of Attila, as translated from the Latin writings of a sixth-century Roman bureaucrat, Jordanes, himself a Goth and a documenter of Gothic history: "a large head, a swarthy complexion, small, deep-seated eyes, a flat nose, a few hairs in the place of a beard, broad shoulders, and a short square body of nervous strength though of a disproportioned form. The haughty step and demeanour of the king of the Huns expressed the consciousness of his superiority above the rest of mankind, and he had the custom of fiercely rolling his eyes as if he wished to enjoy the terror which he inspired."

The vast amounts of treasure the Huns acquired through looting and blackmail were all turned over to Attila. In turn, he astutely lavished great riches on his more powerful followers - gold and silver plate, silver goblets and trays, bridles studded with gold and gems, Chinese silks, Indian pearls. He kept little for himself.

This was not because he was an ascetic; he adopted many Roman ways in place of those of his primitive forefathers. He covered his bed with fine linen, dined in the Roman fashion reclining on a couch, and took wine as his drink.

For Attila, however, the true prize was power, not wealth or ostentation. While guests at his banquets were served food on silver plates and wine in silver goblets, he took his own meal on wooden plates and drank from wooden goblets. While his guests feasted on the full range of Roman cuisine, he ate only meat. "In everything," wrote the Roman diplomat Priscus, "he showed himself temperate. . . . His dress . . . was quite simple, affecting only to be clean. The

sword he carried at his side, the latchets of his . . . shoes, the bridle of his horse were not adorned . . . with gold or gems or anything costly."

The unholy alliance between Rome and Attila finally backfired. In 441, Attila turned his sights on the Romans, beginning with those nearest him in the east. He had been receiving 700 pounds of gold annually from Constantinople to refrain from attacking the eastern Empire, but now he wanted protection money from Rome, too. He smashed a Roman army sent out to stop him and named his price: 2,100 pounds of gold annually, plus an initial down payment of 6,000 pounds – a burden that Rome couldn't bear for long.

Attila had another grievance. The emperor's sister Honoria, trying to duck an arranged match, secretly sent Attila a marriage proposal and a wedding ring. Attila accepted, but when he claimed half the Empire as his dowry, Valentinian III indignantly disavowed the proposal – and anticipating the Hun's inevitable reaction, Aetius put together a hasty alliance of Germanic tribes to fight off the common enemy.

Under Aetius's command, the Roman force went into action with a motley assortment of Visigoths, Burgundians, Franks, Saxons, and Celts from Gaul. Soon, the two great armies faced off at the Battle of the Catalonian Plains in France, about 130 miles southeast of Paris. These fertile fields became - as the Visigoth historian Jordanes put it - "the threshing-floor of countless races." Writing a century later with a barbarian's martial zeal, Jordanes gave a rousing account of the day's gory work: "Hand to hand they clashed in battle, and the fight grew fierce, confused, monstrous, unrelenting - a fight whose like no ancient time has ever recorded. There such deeds were done that a brave man

who missed this marvelous spectacle could not hope to see anything so wonderful all his life long."

The prodigious battle - which, by Jordanes's wild estimate, took 165,000 lives - ended in a virtual standoff, and thus a victory for the West. Indeed, some historians believe that Aetius deliberately let Attila escape in order to preserve the alliance against him. In any case, Attila made an orderly retreat across the Rhine. He had lost much of his credibility as a threat to the West.

But the great Hun got his revenge a year later in a devastating visit to northern Italy, which he and his army ravaged. Attila was preparing to do the same to the rest of the peninsula, with no effective opposition in sight, when a famous summit meeting brought a dramatic end to his plans. As Attila was camped near Mantua, in 452, Pope Leo the Great traveled the 300 miles from Rome to hold a parley. At the end of it, the Huns made an abrupt about-face and left the country. No one knows what the pope said to Attila. Contemporaries believed that the apostles Peter and Paul had appeared to Attila and struck the fear of God in him. Modern historians suggest that Leo reminded Attila that Alaric had died soon after violating the Eternal City and that the same fate awaited him if he followed suit. More prosaically, Attila was surely aware that plague was raging in Italy. Some historians suggest that it may already have reached his troops.

Within a year, Attila would be dead – not killed in glory on the battlefield but dying ignominiously in his marriage bed. After the ceremony uniting him with his latest bride, Ildico, a German, the reveling went on throughout the night. It was early morning before Attila staggered off to bed. "His attendants continued to respect his pleasures, or his repose, the greatest part of the ensuing day, till the unusual

silence alarmed their fears and suspicions; and, after attempting to awaken Attila by loud and repeated cries, they at length broke into the royal apartment," Gibbon writes, with Jordanes as his source. "They found the trembling bride sitting by the bedside, hiding her face with her veil. . . . The king . . . had expired during the night. An artery had suddenly burst . . ."

His faithful Huns buried Attila with full honors. They erected a silk tent to shelter his remains and galloped around it in a final demonstration of the skill they had so long exercised in his behalf. They laid his body in a triple sarcophagus with coffins of gold, silver, and iron; the first two symbolized the treasure he had taken from his enemies, the third the means by which he had taken it. Then they took the body to the bed of a diverted river for burial, placing beside it the arms Attila had stripped from conquered foes, as well as gems and other treasures. The last step, Jordanes wrote, was to safeguard the secrecy of the burial site by slaughtering those who had done the work and laying their corpses beside the king's. The secret was kept, and the tomb remains hidden to this day.

Deprived of Attila's strong hand, the Hunnish power quickly evaporated as his three sons squabbled for the succession. Historians are left to speculate what might have happened if he hadn't listened to Pope Leo, or if the Battle of the Catalonian Plains had swung his way, or if he had lived a year or two longer. As it was, he left a name that still symbolizes terror and savagery.

Shortly after Atilla's death, an entirely new phase of the Empire's decay was ushered in by imperial ineptitude in 454. As his father Honorius had done with Stilicho, Valentinian III grew fearful of Aetius's ambitions and yielded to the prodding of the general's powerful enemies to get rid

of him. Suddenly, during a discussion of financial affairs at the palace, the emperor stabbed Aetius. A court gossip quipped, with more wit than discretion, that Valentinian had "used [his] left hand to cut off [his] right." The friends of Aetius avenged his death by assassinating Valentinian.

This murderous tit-for-tat proved to be a disaster. The established line of succession of Western emperors was terminated since Valentinian was childless. Rome, now deprived of its leading general, lay exposed to the Vandals. In 455, Gaiseric the Lame landed his fleet near the capital, marched into the city, and sacked it. (This was but one of several times that Rome was looted between 410 and 563; during the same period, it was besieged no fewer than eight times and was held by at least six conquerors.)

The Italian peninsula now fell into the hands of Rome's own armies of mixed barbarian mercenaries. Their generals, hoping to make their rule more palatable to the Romans, conscientiously installed and maintained a succession of nominal Western Roman emperors. This transparent fiction persisted for about two decades, until Odoacer, a barbarian of uncertain origin, seized command. The new strongman boldly deposed the incumbent puppet emperor, Romulus Augustulus, a boy still in his teens. Odoacer quietly packed him off to a villa in Campania and neglected to enthrone a successor.

This so-called "fall" of the Western Roman Empire occurred in 476, a year that has since been accepted as Rome's terminal date in history. At the time, however, the event meant little. For all practical purposes, Germans already controlled the West. In a strictly legal sense, the Western Empire survived for four more years: Until 480, Julius Nepos, whom the Eastern Empire recognized as Western emperor, reigned in exile in what is now Slovenia. Yet even

after the “fall,” the empire remained a lively ghost in the West. No Germanic king challenged the authority of the Eastern emperor, and the Romans of the West were still Roman by law and Roman at heart.

For Odoacer, the fall of the empire remained an inescapable reality. Although the general wielded the only real power in Italy, he could not use it effectively without the cooperation of the Romans. To win their support by legitimizing his rule, Odoacer sent a nominal pledge of subservience to Emperor Zeno in Constantinople and asked to be appointed Roman *patricius* - commander in chief. He received from the emperor a carefully hedged affirmation. In the eyes of everyone, however, Odoacer clearly remained an illegal king. As such, he had to be overthrown.

Zeno would not or could not spare Byzantine troops to oust Odoacer, but he was eager to see Germans do the job, even if – or especially if - they had to fight to the last man. Zeno dangled Italy as bait before Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, a promising young man well known to the emperor: Theodoric had been brought up as a hostage in Constantinople; there he had acquired some Greek and Latin learning and respect for all things Roman. Zeno found the king a willing collaborator.

Theodoric and his Ostrogoths invaded Italy in 489, and for nearly four years they fought unceasingly. Odoacer’s forces were whittled down slowly. Finally, Odoacer made the capital mistake of admitting Theodoric to the besieged city of Ravenna under a truce in which the two agreed to rule Italy jointly. At a banquet celebrating the treaty, however, Theodoric proposed a toast to Odoacer and then drew his sword and killed him, and his men slaughtered most of the dead ruler’s warriors.

With this ignoble act, Theodoric began a long and enlightened reign that, for its attempted restoration of the Roman life, might be called the first Renaissance. In his thirty-three years ruling Italy, Theodoric propped up the dilapidated Roman administrative system, once again using Romans as functionaries. Like the emperors of old, he supported cultural activities and engaged in public works, restoring seaports and repairing aqueducts. At his capital at Ravenna, Theodoric built a flamboyant palace complete with glittering mosaics and grand columns transported all the way from Rome. Meanwhile, he carefully maintained the legitimacy of his reign with frequent shows of deference to the imperial authority in Constantinople. In one tactful letter, Theodoric informed the emperor, "Our royalty is an imitation of yours, a copy of the only Empire on earth."

But Theodoric's realm was built on shaky foundations. The Arian Ostrogoths and the Catholic Romans lived in separate communities, each distrusting the other. After Theodoric's death in 526, petty disputes erupted into national disorder.

In Constantinople, the new emperor Justinian viewed Italy's turmoil with more satisfaction than dismay. It gave him a convenient excuse - though he needed none legally - for overthrowing the Ostrogoths, a task he believed he would have no trouble accomplishing. But Italy was only one objective in Justinian's ambitious master plan. The emperor mounted invasions to reconquer the entire Mediterranean West and appointed his brilliant general, Belisarius, to lead the initial seaborne strike.

Belisarius, with an army of 5,000 cavalrymen and 10,000 infantry, landed in North Africa in 533 and made short work of the decadent Vandal kingdom. Then he traveled to Italy by way of Sicily and marched up the peninsula (the same invasion route to be followed by the Allied armies in World

War II). Belisarius took Naples by siege and met little resistance in Rome. Throngs of Romans hailed him as their liberator.

But the Ostrogoths pulled themselves together. They rallied around a fierce chieftain named Totila, who was proclaimed their king in 541. Totila accepted the fact that this was a battle to the death against the empire, and he burned his bridges behind him with two gestures of flagrant defiance: He minted coins that treasonably portrayed him in imperial garments, and he dismissed the Roman Senate, then an impotent body but one that nonetheless symbolized Roman power. Sure enough, the war was long and bloody: For more than two decades, devastating battles raged inconclusively. Finally, in 563, the imperial troops defeated the Ostrogoths.

At that point, the Eastern Empire again held most of Italy, North Africa, and the southern part of Spain. Justinian, who would be called "the Great," seemed well on his way to restoring the glory of the Empire. But at that point, the last of the Germanic invaders arrived from Eastern Europe to push the imperial forces out of northern Italy.

These were the Lombards.

A Germanic tribe that left Scandinavia only in the first century CE, the Lombards spread into present-day Austria and Slovakia and then, between 568 and 572, crossed the Alps to occupy Italy as far south as the Po River valley. (Their Lombard Kingdom was to last well into the eighth century.) Simultaneously, the Visigoths counterattacked the Byzantine legions from northern Spain and began driving them into the sea. Justinian's attempt at reconquest ended up a bloody debacle.

Yet Justinian's failure served a purpose: It taught the people of the former Western Empire some lessons. In Italy especially, bureaucrats and troops sent from Constantinople had treated the local Romans not as liberated countrymen but as subjugated foreigners. This kind of imperial rule, far from fulfilling their hopes for restored glory, was a good deal less tolerable than the enlightened despotism of Theodoric.

In many ways, the Romans of the West now had much more in common with the Germans than they did with the Greek-speaking Byzantines of the East. Few Romans of Italy were glad to see the Lombards come, but at the same time, few could have been genuinely sorry to see the Easterners depart. Time and suffering had gone a long way toward reconciling the Western Romans to the Germans.

Though the Empire was now a reality only in the East, it was by no means an impotent force in the West. Its image would continue to symbolize power and respect for centuries to come, even achieving a kind of afterlife as the Holy Roman Empire. For now, however, it was gone.

By the end of the fifth century, the map of Western Europe had changed dramatically. Once, it had all been part of the Roman Empire, but now it was a patchwork, dotted with warring kingdoms, tribal enclaves, and feuding principalities. Most of Spain belonged to the Visigoths, France to the Franks, and Italy to the Ostrogoths. The frontier that for so long had fenced off the barbarians was gone, but so were the barbarians. Celts, Franks, Vandals, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Lombards - all had given up the ways of their forefathers for a new hybrid life and a larger vision.

In doing so, they laid the foundations of medieval Europe.

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5

"TWO HALVES MAKE A COMPLETE COIN"

THE MITER AND THE CROWN

The collapse of the Roman Empire left a vacuum in its wake.

Without the order imposed by the Roman government, the continent was an ever-shifting mélange of warring barbarian kingdoms. Borders changed unpredictably; administrations crumbled; road and communications systems deteriorated. Fortunately, as historian Gerald Simons pointed out in his magisterial 1968 work, *Barbarian Europe,* there was an organization waiting in the wings to fill the void: the Roman Catholic Church.

In its early days in the empire, Christianity was concentrated in the cities. As the Church grew, its structure naturally began to mirror that of the Empire's. Regional authority became concentrated in urban centers where the provincial governors presided, with bishops supervising the priests in outlying towns and villages. After Theodosius made Christianity the Empire's official religion in CE 380, the Church quickly evolved into a well-staffed network of clerics. Then, as the Empire withered, its bureaucrats, no longer paid, left their posts. The Church functionaries were there to assume the essential duties of civic government, making the Church the secular as well as the religious authority in the former Empire. None of this happened by design, but the popes, struggling to maintain any kind of central authority, were by no means reluctant to see the Church take on the additional burdens – or the additional power.

The result was Christendom, an imaginary realm that, in the absence of formal governments with settled boundaries, could serve as a unifying identity for the Church and its followers. It gave ordinary Christians a sense of connection with their spiritual brethren and helped to legitimize the secular role of the Church and its bishops.

As the newly established regional powers, the bishops developed a hesitant, unofficial relationship with the invading barbarian kings. The crude tribesmen were still basically nomads, with no concept of governing a fixed settlement; they needed the bishops and their bureaucratic structure if they were to keep the empire functioning and reap the full benefits of their conquests. But the bishops were equally dependent on the kings' warriors as the means of maintaining order and punishing wrongdoers. With the tribesmen as their enforcers, the bishops' roles expanded, and they became advisers, diplomats, and chief bureaucrats in the evolving barbarian governments. The miter and the crown became inseparable.

Some bishops even cooperated with heretical kings who followed Arianism, which was spreading rapidly as the Visigoth territory expanded through Spain and Gaul as far north as the Loire. To fight it, the Church wanted to promote a Germanic king who would champion the orthodox Roman Catholic creed.

They found him in Clovis, the adolescent king of the Franks. He was the son of King Childeric, a ruler whose unseemly behavior had his kingdom in an uproar in the 450s. For a while, Childeric's nobles - incensed by his habit of seducing their daughters – threatened to rebel. When he discovered that they intended to assassinate him, he fled.

Childeric left behind at least one friend. Before leaving, Childeric gave this friend a token to be used as a signal when the exiled king could safely return. As the medieval historian Gregory of Tours tells the story, they broke a gold coin into two halves. Childeric took one with him, and the friend kept the other half. "When I send my half to you," said the friend, "and the two halves make a complete coin, you will know that you may return home safe and sound."

Pocketing his token, Childeric rode off to the kingdom of Thuringia, now in central Germany.

With the king gone, the Franks unanimously chose as their leader the Roman Aegidius. But he was prone to political intrigue, and after eight years, the Franks soured on Roman rule and yearned for Childeric to return. “Childeric’s faithful friend,” wrote Gregory, “sent messengers to the exile with half the broken coin. . . . By this token, Childeric knew for sure that the Franks wanted him back, indeed, they were clamoring for him to return, and he left Thuringia and was restored to his throne.”

Meanwhile, the king of Thuringia was repaid for his kindness in sheltering Childeric by seeing his wife go off with their guest; the exiled king, she insisted, was the wisest, strongest, and most beautiful man on Earth. He made her his queen, and Clovis was the product of their passionate union.

Childeric died in CE 481, when his son was only fifteen, but it did not take the boy long to prove his abilities as a leader and to become “a great and outstanding fighter,” as Gregory of Tours called him. In just five years, Clovis managed to push the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom to the Loire, in central France. Battling Romans and barbarians alike, he consolidated Frankish power by conquering Gaul and unifying it under his rule. His descendants would rule much of the province for the next 200 years, and many French historians regard Clovis as the first real king of the country we know as France.

Clovis succeeded in turning his unruly followers into a disciplined army. When marching his men through friendly territory, he did not permit them to do any damage. He personally inspected their weapons to make sure they were

properly taken care of, and after a successful battle, he collected all the booty and distributed it impartially to his soldiers.

Clovis, though a stereotypical barbarian - brutal, rapacious, and unrefined - was shrewd enough to understand the Church's need for a Catholic champion among the Germanic kings. He cultivated Bishop Remi of Rheims and chose for his bride the Catholic Burgundian princess Clothilde. With her encouragement, Clovis was baptized by Bishop Remi in 496 – along with 3,000 of his warriors. Soon all the Frankish tribes were following suit, and the bishops' counterweight to Arianism was firmly established.

In CE 507, Clovis marched across the Loire into Gothic territory, defeated the Visigoth army, and drove the Gothic settlers out of Gaul into Spain. Those who wanted to keep their homes could stay, but only if they accepted Catholic baptism. Within a decade, the Franks and the Catholics controlled most of Gaul and were expanding into southeastern Gaul and north into what is now Germany. The Frankish Church prospered accordingly, having been granted new taxing rights and extensive gifts of land, first by Clovis and then by his sons.

Perhaps inevitably, this era of Frankish solidarity was destined to end. The kings in Clovis's line eventually fell into disputes over the succession. No longer engaged in expansionary wars, the Frankish nobles turned to persecuting the peasants on their provincial estates.

The Church continued to thrive; by the end of the seventh century, it owned a third of all the land in the kingdom. But the clerics got caught up in the general moral rot. Bishopric were now for sale to the highest bidders, and many of the

Frankish noblemen who bought them were ignorant, greedy men, promoting corruption and venality.

While popes and bishops were not immune to these abuses, Christian principles would eventually inspire ecclesiastic reform.

But even the purest of priests faced a fundamental problem in spreading the new religion. Christianity itself was an elusive concept to the barbarian mind. While the idea of eternal salvation was welcome, and cause enough to be baptized, Christ's example of humility, sacrifice, and "turning the other cheek" was a concept alien to people whose lives revolved around battle and plunder. From the beginning, priests and missionaries learned to accept converts without questioning their motives or expectations, hoping that in time, true Christian ideals would rub off on them.

Meanwhile, many of the new Christians saw no incongruity in embracing the faith and their pagan war gods at the same time.

Recognizing that it might take centuries for the heathens to comprehend and fully appreciate the true faith, Pope Gregory the Great, at the end of the sixth century, advised turning pagan temples into churches and adapting heathen rituals to suit the needs of pagans and Christians alike. Thus the pagan celebration of the winter solstice was celebrated as Christ's birthday.

But Christ himself was a lofty, somewhat remote figure, whose teachings were hard to understand and swallow. People everywhere believed in magic and miracles and loved stories of saints and martyrs, intimate figures whose sufferings they could relate to. So the Cross took a back

seat to holy relics and the veneration of Mary and the saints. By one count, the church recognized more than 25,000 saints at the peak of Medieval credulity.

In its early days, the Church frowned on the worship of saints. But in 787, a general Church council not only accepted the veneration of saintly relics but decreed that any bishop who consecrated a church without holy relics "shall be deposed as a transgressor of the ecclesiastical traditions." Thousands of relics were collected and exalted. Most of them were spurious, but it didn't matter; the supposed fingernail of a dead saint, kept reverently in a glittering reliquary, inspired pilgrimages and reinforced the passionate piety of peasants and priests alike, and helped keep the Church coffers full.

The Church also found itself taking a hand in the barbarians' legal affairs.

Despite their acceptance of Christianity, the Germanic tribes clung to their traditional codes of conduct, evolved over centuries and handed down by word of mouth. Each tribe had its own code, often a tangle of conflicting precepts and customs, legends and superstitions. As Christianity melded with this tradition, the fiercely pious people came to believe that God participated in every trial, making the truth discernable, punishing the guilty and protecting the innocent.

Legal proceedings became deeply religious affairs, hinging less on established facts than on professions of faith. A trial had no judge or jury; the local count or his representative presided, a panel of local dignitaries acted as advisers, and several learned clerks supplied precedents. The verdict – which was taken as the will of God – was reached by consensus.

After an accuser stated the evidence, which could include hearsay and pure surmise, it was up to the defendant to prove his innocence. The accused had to be both eloquent and convincing in testifying. Any misstep, no matter how small – a stutter, a cough, a mispronounced name – meant that God was signaling guilt.

Skeptics, including some priests and prelates, denounced the doctrine that verdicts were always God's will and that ordeals uncovered the truth. They were especially scornful of trial by combat, arguing that God would not condone, much less participate in, acts of violence. But the practices persisted, and the Church itself wasn't above making cynical use of them. Priests were exempted from trial by battle but were permitted to have representatives fight for them. In legal disputes, mostly over land, prelates would hire skilled swordsmen to make their cases. By the late seventh century, Gerald Simons wrote, "Many land-rich monasteries kept powerful warriors on retainer to fight their frequent judicial battles."

These abuses of the legal process, like Church corruption and immorality in general, were subject to periodic reforms. But over the centuries, the resentment they caused wouldn't be settled until the Reformation and the breakaway of the Church of England.

Far to the west in post-Roman Britain, the Church played a different, but equally important, role.

When the legions pulled out in CE 410, it was left to the native Britons and Celts to defend their land from the Anglo-Saxon raiders. They did their best, particularly under a chieftain named Arthur, a legendary figure who was said to have presided over a round table of chivalric knights. (More likely, he was a Celtic warlord at the head of an army

as rag-tag as the enemy's.) But the Angles and Saxons were too strong for him and the other defenders, and by 600, they held most of England.

By that time, their conversion to Christianity was well under way. It all began - according to a story told by a scholar and monk, the Venerable Bede of the Kingdom of Northumbria - when a young prelate in Rome spied a group of young Angles on the slave block and was struck by their fair skin and blond hair. When he asked who they were, he was told, "Anguli." He responded "Angeli Dei" - not Angles, but Angels of God - and vowed to convert the whole race. His chance came when he became Pope Gregory I (later called "the Great") and decided that one of his main tasks would be the conversion of the pagan barbarians. He sent a missionary, Augustine, to Britain to carry out his plan.

Augustine, who landed on the island in 597, converted the Saxon leaders in short order – perhaps too short. As happened in many early baptisms, the full implications of Christianity were far from clear to the converts. When one of them, King Raedwald of East Anglia, returned home from his baptism, he set up two altars: one for Christ, the other for sacrificing victims to pagan gods.

Augustine made his seat in Canterbury, where he was ordained the first English bishop, and set up a network of missions and churches. But the task facing his mission was formidable.

Anglo-Saxons were still only half civilized, and spiritual life was the least of their concerns. The famous epic Beowulf makes it abundantly clear how primitive the lifestyle of even the greatest Saxon lords was in Raedwald's day. A chieftain's hall was little more than a large wooden shed, with a hearth down the middle and holes in the roof to let

out the smoke; people sat on crude benches lining the walls.

The chieftains themselves were far more ornate than their dwellings: They glittered with jewels, gold buckles, and cloisonné brooches purchased with the spoils of war and pillage. Under a hill south of the Forth River in Scotland, a hoard of silver flagons and dishes has been found – probably loot taken from a Gallic church or mansion - that some Saxon of this era must have buried for safekeeping. Many of the pieces had been hacked in half; perhaps two bands had cooperated in the raid, and this mutilation was their way of dividing the loot.

But the most spectacular proof of Anglo-Saxon wealth comes from a burial mound discovered by archeologist Basil Brown in 1939 on the grounds of a country house at Sutton Hoo, in eastern England. The site was an Anglo-Saxon cemetery overlooking a tidal estuary in East Anglia. Inside the big mound was a boat that had been dragged up a steep slope from the River Deben and covered with earth. Over the years, the oak planks and ribs of the hull had rotted, leaving behind a clear impression of the ship on the compacted ground. The ship itself - the largest Anglo-Saxon vessel ever found - was estimated to be eighty-nine feet long, a seagoing craft with oars but no evidence of a mast or sail.

Inside the boat was a fortune in silver and gold, jewels and artifacts, some of them imports from Eastern Europe or the Near East, others bearing the Christian cross as decoration.

One of the most famous objects to survive was the so-called Sutton Hoo helmet. Made of iron and decorated with tinned bronze figures of warriors and powerful animals, its crest is formed by a two-headed serpent, while the mask

protecting the wearer's face is a dragon-like beast. The eyebrows are the creature's wings, the nose its body, and the mustache its tail. Boar's heads tip each outstretched wing.

Also found in the tomb was one of the most extraordinary objects dating from the early Anglo-Saxon period: a huge scepter that is, in fact, a four-sided whetstone used for sharpening blades. Each end is carved with four somber faces, perhaps representing gods or ancestral figures. The whetstone is topped with a stag, a symbol of strength and speed.

An elaborate, corroded coat of chain mail was also buried within the ship. It had been folded several times, with a leather garment and several silver vessels stacked on top of it. The prodigious amount of labor needed to forge and link the tiny iron circles into a thigh-length coat is further testimony to the wealth of its owner.

A belt buckle unearthed at Sutton Hoo is one of the most magnificent specimens of this era found to date. Most Anglo-Saxon men wore a belt fastened with a buckle; the more elaborate the buckle, the more important the man. The solid gold Sutton Hoo buckle weighs almost seven pounds and is decorated with thirteen animals, including serpents, birds of prey, and four-legged creatures no one has yet identified. The buckle is hollow like a box, with a lid that opens and closes on a hinge with a complex mechanism. It may have contained a personal item, possibly a relic carried to protect its wearer.

The mystery of the Sutton Hoo tomb remained unsolved for decades, in part because no human remains were found. Some archeologists have argued that no one had ever been buried there, that Sutton Hoo was not an actual grave but a

cenotaph - a memorial monument. Others maintained that there had been a body, but like the wood, it had rotted over time. Modern science proved them right: Soil samples contained residual phosphate - a chemical left behind when a human or animal body has decayed.

But whose body was it? The clues were contradictory. Only a pagan would be given a boat burial, but why would a pagan have bowls adorned with the cross in his grave? Forty coins were found, all minted before CE 625, though they could have been put in the boat any time after that. But they were worth only a small amount of money, and there are no duplications; each is a different type and from a different mint.

The answer to the riddle turns out to be yet another illustration of the dilemma facing Augustine and his missionaries: the difficulty of conveying true Christian ideals. The most likely candidate now for the tomb's occupant is none other than King Raedwald himself. Although a convert to Christianity, he still worshiped pagan gods, which would explain the mixture of artifacts. He died in 624 or 625, the date the coins point to.

As for the coins themselves, a ship this size would have needed a crew of forty oarsmen. It's possible that the forty coins were included as payment for the spirits who would row the vessel to its destination in the pagan afterlife; the two ingots of higher value might have been payment for the helmsman.

The burial is further proof that the Anglo-Saxon lords of the seventh century clung to their old beliefs even after their nominal baptisms.

As Christian doctrine sank in, however, the rough-hewn Anglo-Saxons began to soften. And by the end of the seventh century, the old gods were in retreat and Christianity was the dominant religion. A new trend in the Church provided both an impetus and an obstacle to conversion. A wave of clerical reform was spreading rapidly. Monasticism had originated in the Eastern Empire as early as the fourth century CE, but now it was spreading in the West in response to the decay of Rome: Pious men and women who couldn't tolerate the dying Empire's corruption and immorality took to a life of prayer, fasting, and meditation, either as hermits or with like-minded men and women in monasteries or convents. St. Benedict provided a strict, comprehensive rule for the monastic life, and Pope Gregory himself was a Benedictine monk before his election as pope.

Monasticism had found especially fertile ground in Ireland, from whence zealous Celtic monks traveled to Britain, Scotland, and even Gaul to preach the Gospel. Among the Anglo-Saxons, the monks were competing for converts with Augustine's Roman Catholic missionaries from Italy, and this rivalry became a struggle for jurisdiction over the Church in Britain. A synod in 663 settled the issue in favor of the Italians, and a new wave of English Benedictines, headed by the monk who would be canonized as St. Boniface, spread through Britain and on to Gaul. Gregory put Boniface in charge of organizing the Church in Germany, where Boniface imposed ecclesiastical reform and enforced papal authority. Gradually the Irish monks submitted to the traditions of Rome, and the western Church was united, for a while at least.

And now, with Christianity a given in most of the British Isles, the miter gave way to the crown: The role of the Church became secondary as scattered small kingdoms

united to build what would become one of the world's great powers - England.

As in Ireland and elsewhere in medieval Europe, the kingdoms of Britain were often at odds with each other. But by the end of the ninth century, a king known as Alfred the Great had taken control of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex in southern Britain. This great king, some historians believe, was the determining factor in pulling England together.

At his birth, it was unlikely that Alfred would ever wear the crown. As the youngest of King Aethelwulf's five sons, the odds were heavily stacked against him.

But fate intervened. Alfred's eldest brother, Aethelstan, predeceased their father. His next brother, Aethelbald, died in 860, followed by the third, Aethelberht, in 865. The fourth son, Aethelred, died in 871, just before his father's death. Within twenty years, Wessex had lost four king's sons from the same generation.

Being the youngest may also have provided Alfred some advantages over his brothers. As the last in line, it is possible that he was being groomed for a career in the Church. His bookishness and love of learning may have stemmed from an education that was priming him for a less public career. Whatever the case, it served England well.

Alfred is the only English ruler before Henry VIII whose philosophical writings survive. His translations of Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and St. Augustine's *Soliloquies* into Old English are subtly infused with his personal views of kingship. These were underscored by his code of law, which stressed loyalty to the king to an almost laughable degree – likening the

relationship between subject and monarch to that of disciple and Christ, and declaring that no mercy could be offered for treachery.

Such scholarship was typical of Alfred's rule. He understood the power of the written word and made it compulsory that all of his nobles' sons learn to read. He also seems to have commissioned both the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – annals of the tribes from as early as 60 BCE – and his own biography, Bishop Asser's *Life of King Alfred.* This work, while no hagiography, presents an extremely favorable view of the king's career. If the picture that historians draw of Alfred is sometimes too rosy, it is because the king was clever enough to supply much of the material himself.

Alfred's resourcefulness is evident following a Viking raid in 878. By that time, the Norsemen had been pillaging the English coasts for nearly a century and controlled a large chunk of northeastern England called the Danelaw. A powerful chieftain named Guthrum had signed a peace treaty with Alfred, but on the feast of the Epiphany in 878, Guthrum launched a surprise, nighttime attack on Alfred's royal stronghold at Chippenham, ninety-six miles west of London, in which many of Alfred's men were killed. Escaping through woods and swamps, Alfred reached Althelney, an island surrounded by soggy marshland, and built a fortification. From there, he rallied local militias from Hampshire, Somerset, and Wiltshire and waged a guerilla war against the invaders.

Alfred defeated Guthrum in Edington later that year, and the two signed a peace treaty. One of the terms was that Guthrum convert to Christianity, a decision that bound the Viking king to Alfred and neutralized a threat – never again would he attack Wessex. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded the event: "Then the raiding army granted him

[Alfred] hostages and great oaths that they would leave his kingdom and also promised him that their king [Guthrum] would receive baptism; and they fulfilled it. And three weeks later, the king Guthrum came to him . . . and the king received him at baptism . . .”

A decade of fragile peace followed. Alfred, however, did not relax his guard but instead organized a new set of fortifications. Towns or forts – known as burhs – had their defenses strengthened or established for the first time, and precise arrangements were made for their garrisoning: Local landowners were obliged to provide four men to defend each “pole” of wall (a length of five-and-a-half yards).

When the Vikings broke the treaty and returned to Wessex in the early 890s, the kingdom was ready. This defensive network and military reorganization were partially based on earlier Anglo-Saxon systems, but mainly on those of Alfred’s stepmother’s father, the French king, Charles the Bald. After Alfred’s death in 899, his preparations enabled his son Edward and grandson Aethelstan to drive the Vikings out of the Danelaw forever and to establish the kingdom of England.

Historians quick to praise Alfred as the greatest king in history have often overlooked a number of factors – most conspicuously, how much of Alfred’s success was built on luck. But rather than detracting from his greatness, this underscores the importance of his reign, as well as his ability to take advantage of every break he got. It is a touch of realism that helps in understanding that what some call fate was in no way unavoidable, and that the creation of the English kingdom was anything but inevitable.

By the conclusion of Alfred’s rule in CE 899, Anglo-Saxon barbarianism had vanished. The outsiders had become insiders.

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6

"CHARLEMAGNE'S EMPIRE WAS . . . DYING OF ITS OWN GREAT SIZE"

THE BIRTH AND RISE OF FRANCE

Across the English Channel, at least some aspects of civilization were advancing a good deal faster than in the wilds of Britain.

Here, the influence of Roman society was already transforming the barbarians – not into Romans, but into something new. It happened first and decisively in Gaul, the former Roman province that was turning into what is now France.

By the end of the seventh century, kings from the line of Clovis I – known to history as the Merovingian kings – had degenerated into feeble fops whose specialty was feuding and intrigue. Their impotence as monarchs spurred the growth of feudalism in France, with the provincial barons effectively ruling vast areas of the country.

What remained of centralized power in the realm was assumed by a hereditary line of nobles called Mayors of the Palace. They controlled the treasury, held title to the land, and had the power to grant royal favors while the kings were mere figureheads. One of these mayors, Pepin of Herstal, united the fractured kingdom at the end of the seventh century and took the title Duke and Prince of the Franks. Pepin's death in 714 touched off a struggle among his heirs that broke into civil war, but ended with the victory of his son Charles Martel, who proved to be an able king who would reform and modernize the government, and whose grandson, Charlemagne, would more than double the size of the kingdom and establish its permanence in the European continent.

Charles Martel's strong suit was battle; his surname meant "the Hammer," and he earned it in a series of military campaigns fought throughout his reign. He perfected a tactic that had been long used in the Eastern Empire but

was new to the West: a surprise attack on the enemy, followed by a feigned retreat. When the adversary's troops attempted pursuit, Charles would regroup his men, turn them around, and attack again. The maneuver, which required perfect timing by the general and iron discipline among the soldiers, was highly effective, allowing Charles not only to expand his territory but to keep both rival rulers and his fractious nobles under control.

In conjunction with his military might, Charles's diplomacy was shrewd and effective. He acknowledged the nominal rule of the Merovingian kings, in exchange for their affirmation of his mayoralty. He supported the efforts of the elderly British monk Boniface, whose Benedictines were efficiently spreading Frankish influence along with Christianity far past the Rhine. Charles also won alliances with important Church prelates by donating land for abbeys and monasteries. Once he had pacified his Frankish territory, he took on the Saxons to the west and the Alemanni – a confederation of Germanic tribes - to the north, moving his borders into Belgium and Bavaria.

The greatest threat Charles faced was from Spain – and from a powerful new enemy: the rapidly expanding forces of Islam. While the Eastern Empire in Constantinople had for a century prevented the Muslims from advancing on the West, the Moors of North Africa had pulled off an end run around the whole Mediterranean Sea by crossing the Strait of Gibraltar in 711. In one decisive battle, the Moors had defeated the hapless Visigoth army. Soon they overran the entire Iberian Peninsula. They would dominate there for three centuries, effectively removing Spain from the western world. But the fact that they advanced no farther was due primarily to Charles Martel.

Spain was the spearhead of a Muslim empire that by then stretched all the way from India to the Atlantic coast, and its rulers had no intention of stopping there. By the 730s Islamic raiders were marauding deep into Gaul as far north as the Loire. To stop them would require more than part-time farmer-soldiers, who were available to fight only after the crops had been planted and before the harvest.

Charles knew he would need a real army to defeat the Moors, and that he would have to pay them so they could feed their families during their training. To raise funds, he risked his alliance with the Church by reclaiming some of the land he had donated. For a while, the abbots and bishops threatened him with excommunication – until a Moorish force defeated the Duke of Aquitaine at Bordeaux in 732, looting several wealthy monasteries and marching on others near Tours. After Charles's trained army routed the Moors at Poitiers, the prelates withdrew their objections.

Historians still debate whether this battle was the key to turning back the Muslim tide, but there's no question that it marked a turning point and earned Charles his sobriquet, "the Hammer." He soon drove the remaining Moorish forces from southern France, discouraging further raids, and spent the rest of his administrative years shoring up the frontiers of the kingdom. When the last Merovingian monarch died, Charles neglected to appoint a new one, and the last four years of his reign were technically an interregnum, with no one officially in charge of the government.

When Charles died in 741, his son Pepin the Short proved to be an even better diplomat than his father. Pepin continued Charles's work by inviting Boniface, still in charge of the clergy, to root out corruption among the parishes in the western part of the kingdom. Then he used Boniface's

reforms to reinforce his own power by disciplining unruly bishops.

Ten years into his reign, Pepin also solved the problem of how to claim the royal title. Perhaps at Boniface's suggestion, he sent the current pope, Zachary, a loaded abstract question: Would it be correct for one man to have the title of king when another man had the actual power? The pope, eager to curry favor with a man who was fast becoming the leading power in the West, promptly sent back the answer Pepin was seeking: No, the real ruler should wear the crown. Pepin summoned his nobles to acclaim him king, and the Merovingian heir was sent off to a monastery.

But seeking the pope's blessing meant Pepin must repay the favor - and required him to protect the Church and advance the faith as well. At the pope's request, Pepin led an army to Italy to ward off the Lombard barbarians who

were encroaching on Rome, and he returned the lands he conquered to the papacy; they would become the foundation of the Papal States.

In his seventeen years as king, Pepin expanded his kingdom at the expense of the Moors, Basques, and Bavarians, cementing his father's bureaucratic reforms and advancing the transformation of his people from barbarian Franks to something approaching the French. But although Pepin was a powerful and successful ruler, his accomplishments were far overshadowed by those of his son Charles. But then Charles I, known universally as Charlemagne, overshadowed almost everyone.

When King Pepin died in CE 768, he followed the disruptive Frankish tradition of splitting his realm between his sons,

Charles, then twenty-four, and his younger brother Carloman. The siblings quarreled and were on the brink of war when, in 771, Carloman suddenly died. His death, though unexplained, is generally attributed to natural causes.

So, the greatest king in history, credited with miraculous powers - even the ability to rise from the dead to save his nation - took sole control of Pepin's kingdom. British historian Lord James Bryce wrote that modern history began on Christmas Day 800, when Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor.

Charlemagne was a man of enormous energy, great personal strength, insatiable intellectual curiosity, and true imperial presence; the Carolingian dynasty was named for him. Though he was capable of barbaric cruelty and had a less than perfect grasp of Christian charity – on a single day, he beheaded 4,500 prisoners who refused to be baptized – he usually used his power with restraint and benevolence, doing all he could to improve his subjects' lives. He never mastered the art of writing, but understood the value of literacy and was the driving force behind a standardized form of script, the Carolingian minuscule, that later became the basis for modern European printed alphabets. He was a formidable general and warrior, but his most storied campaign was a catastrophic loss – his 778 foray into Muslim Spain, in which the rearguard of his retreating army was caught in a mountain pass at Roncesvalles and massacred. That event was the basis for the epic poem *Chanson de Roland.*

In almost thirty years of nearly constant warfare, Charles continued to expand and consolidate his kingdom, until it constituted not only all the European holdings of the onetime Roman Empire but also lands the Caesars had

never ruled. In his conquests, Charlemagne piled up great treasure, which he shared generously with his troops, his nobles, and the upper echelons of the clergy.

His power was extended when an insurrection broke out in Rome in 779. Pope Leo III fled north across the Alps to plead with Charles to protect him from his enemies. Charles headed south and restored order, and to return the favor, the pope crowned him Emperor of the Romans.

Even after more than three centuries, the ghost of the Roman Empire had lingered among the tribesmen who had supplanted it. It was remembered as the standard of excellence - of conquest, magnificence, competent government, and unparalleled wealth. Now one of those tribesmen had, indeed, risen to become emperor, and the Empire had come back to life, of a sort.

It was a curious construct – neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. Its successive rulers were to be elected by a shifting coalition of European monarchs, none of whom granted the emperor sovereignty. Yet the institution would last, with two brief interruptions, for just over a millennium, and the title of emperor would be greatly prized for its honor and prestige.

Charlemagne, assured by the pope that he had been "crowned by God," donned a Roman tunic and cloak for his coronation, but never wore the costume again and, in fact, never returned to Rome. Still, he was determined to revive the Empire's classical culture. His court at Aachen, on the fringe of modern Germany, was a magnet for the best minds of the age; scholars and theologians flocked to the emperor's academy to exchange ideas and feed his wide-ranging curiosity. The intellectual and artistic fervor he inspired has been called the Carolingian Renaissance, a

foretaste of the great reawakening that was to dawn 500 years later in Italy.

Charlemagne tended carefully to the administration of his vast empire, attempting to emulate the Roman ideal of integrity and efficiency while forestalling corruption. He recognized that his kingdom was evolving rapidly and that his subjects were no longer a homogeneous people, but the descendants of multiple barbarian tribes as well as Gallo-Romans, nomads from the steppes, former Muslims, and many other outlanders. He upheld the barbarian legal codes, but he eliminated many ambiguities and contradictions in their precepts, and added his own ordinances suited to the fast-changing society; furthermore, he made them irreversible and beyond appeal.

But the kingdom that Charlemagne had established would not remain intact after his death.

In part, it was simply too big to be maintained in an age of lumbering travel, primitive communication systems, and an economy with no cash flow. Charlemagne's efforts to enlarge and consolidate the realm ultimately worked against his successors: His crushing of restive barbarian tribes, such as the Frisians along the North Sea and the Avars in central Europe, merely opened the way for new enemies, including Muslims from the south and Magyars to the east. The bureaucrats he trained to increase the efficiency of his government were all the better equipped to undermine the kings who came after him.

As the historian Regine Pernoud concluded in *The Age of Charlemagne*, "Charlemagne's empire was, in fact, a giant dying of its own great size - and of his very efforts to preserve it."

Under his weaker Carolingian successors, the unified kingdom crumbled back into a patchwork of feudal principalities. Little more than three decades after the emperor’s death in 814, nomadic Magyars were harassing the kingdom’s eastern borders, and Saracens from north Africa were looting St. Peter’s and profaning the Tombs of the Apostles in Rome. Charlemagne had spent his last years worrying about the Viking raids on his northern and western provinces, and in 845, the Norsemen sacked Paris itself. Yet nothing could erase the record of his achievements, or his image as a great and noble king.

With his father and grandfather, Charlemagne had transformed barbarian Gaul into a foretaste of European France – and even though his realm proved too advanced for its time and too large for anyone else to control, the concept and reality of France as an entity had been set in stone.

If not for Charlemagne, the historian Lord Bryce concluded, “the history of the world would have been different.”

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7

"FROM THE WRATH OF THE NORTHMEN, O LORD, DELIVER US!"

THE LAST BARBARIAN HORDE

In the summer of 921, an envoy of the caliph of Baghdad, Ahmad ibn Fadlan, went on a mission to the king of the Bulgars, a Slavic people living along the middle Volga, in European Russia. On his journey, he passed a band of Rus - Viking traders from Sweden - who had camped along the river to sell their boatload of slaves. The inquisitive Ibn Fadlan decided to stay a while and record what he saw. His horrifying yet fascinating description of Viking habits was to be echoed all over Europe – showing the evolving barbarians there how far they had come:

> They are the filthiest people under god. They never wash off excrement or urine; they do not wash after sexual relations; they do not wash their hands after meals. They are like wild donkeys.
>
> When they arrive from their country they anchor their boats on the Atul [the Volga], which is a mighty river, and build along its banks large wooden houses. In each one of these, ten and twenty people, more or less, live together. Each has a bed on which he rests. With them are beautiful young female slaves intended for the slave merchants. Each of the men will have sexual relations with his slave with his companions looking on. Sometimes whole bunches of them unite in this manner, one in front of the other. If a slave merchant enters to buy a young slave from one of them and finds the master in the midst of having relations with her, the master does not withdraw from her before having satisfied his needs.
>
> Every day they must wash their face and head, and they do it in the dirtiest and filthiest way possible. Every morning the young serving girl arrives carrying a large bowl full of water. She puts it before her master, and he washes his hands and his face as well as his hair. He

> washes and combs out his hair into the basin, and then blows his nose and spits and does every other possible filthy act into this water. When he has finished what he has to do, the servant girl carries the bowl to the man next to him, and this one does just as his companion had done. She continues to pass the bowl from one to the other till it has made the circle of all who live in the house.

During Ibn Fadlan's encounter with the Rus, they were preparing for a chieftain's funeral. It was a boat burial, but unlike the one at Sutton Hoo, this one was to end with the cremation of the body, the boat, and all its contents. The ceremony was to include the ritual murder of a slave who would accompany her lord to the afterlife. Ibn Fadlan wrote, "She is entrusted to two other young female slaves who watch over her and are with her wherever she goes, to the point of at times washing her feet with their own hands." When the fateful day arrived, the doomed girl paid a visit to the various Rus notables and had intercourse with them. Each instructed her, "Tell your master that I did this only out of love for him."

The men pulled the boat for the burial up on the bank of the river, propped it up with stakes, and stacked firewood underneath. On the floor of the ship, they set up a tent with a bed inside, covered with a brocaded spread and brocaded cushions, for the corpses of the chief and his slave. An old woman, who was called the Angel of Death, directed the scene. At the appropriate moment, "the old woman seized [the girl to be sacrificed] by the head and bade her go into the tent and entered along with her. Then the men set about beating with their clubs on their shields so that no one would hear the sound of her cries and other slave girls would not be frightened and would not try to escape death with their masters. Next six men entered the tent and had

relations with the young girl. Next they laid her down beside her master. Two seized her feet, two others her hands. The old woman called the Angel of Death came up, put a cord about her neck so that the two ends were apart and gave it to the [remaining] two men to pull. Then she went up to the girl, holding a dagger with a wide blade, and kept plunging it between the ribs and pulling it out while the two men strangled with the cord until the girl was dead."

The last act was to set fire to this grisly bier: "The fire swept over the wood, then the boat, then the tent, the corpse, the girl, and all that was on the boat."

These Swedish Vikings, together with their Danish and Norwegian brothers, were rough primitives at a time when the Celts, Franks, Goths, and Saxons had already taken up a less barbarous life. Just as these newly civilized peoples had once plundered the enticing treasures of the Romans, now the Vikings pillaged the treasures of the Slavs in Russia, the Frankish empire in Europe, the Anglo-Saxons in England, and the Celts in Ireland. They descended upon Italy, North Africa, and the Byzantine Empire, burning, looting, and enslaving. Their longboats would take them anywhere; no land or peoples were safe. When Viking raiders hit the south coast of England in 787, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reported: "Came three ships of Northmen. . . . And then the . . . sheriff rode to the place, and would have driven them to the king's residence, because he knew not who they were: and they slew him. These were the first ships of Danish men which sought the land of the English nation."

Six years later, the entry for 793 states: "The ravaging of heathen men lamentably destroyed Gods church at Lindisfarne through rapine and slaughter." Lindisfarne was an island off the coast of England near its border with

Scotland, the site of a venerable monastic community. When the "heathen men" quit the place, most of the monks had been murdered or carted off for sale as slaves, with the buildings looted and burned. Soon, churches throughout England were echoing a new prayer, "From the wrath of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us!"

So began an astonishing age of lawlessness, exploration, warfare, migration, and settlement that would leave a lasting imprint on the world.

At the height of their plundering of Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries, the Vikings seemed invincible – all-powerful warriors whose ships were the ultimate in seafaring technology. From bases on islands near the mouths of major rivers, they would maraud through the countryside, looting and burning towns, seizing the rich cargoes of caravans, and stripping churches and monasteries of their treasures.

"The number of ships increases, the endless flood of Vikings never ceases to grow bigger," wrote the scholar Ermentarius of Noirmoutier. "Everywhere Christ's people are the victims of massacre, burning, and plunder. The Vikings overrun all that lies before them, and none can withstand them. . . . Ships past counting voyage up the Seine, and throughout the entire region evil grows strong."

Ibn Fadlan's Rus, coming from Sweden, whose coastline faces east, focused their energies in that direction. Their longboats ruled the Danube all the way to the Black Sea, plundering or exacting tribute even from the mighty Byzantine Empire, where the Norse warriors were so respected that they were hired as members of the emperor's personal guard. And as the Swedes headed east, the Vikings of Denmark and Norway, geographically

oriented to the West, mainly sailed that way. For four centuries after the attack on Lindisfarne, their bands descended on Western Europe, laying siege not only to cities and baronial castles but to monasteries, convents, and churches, the wealthiest institutions in the land.

What propelled the Vikings onto the stage of history with such sudden and destructive force?

The causes are as obscure as the derivation of the name "Viking" itself: The word is variously translated as "pirate," "creek, inlet, or small bay," or "sea mile" – the distance covered by a single shift of rowers. But in the ninth century and beyond, when men said they were going *"i viking,"* nobody needed a translation.

The people of Europe had their own theory to explain the Viking menace: the Norsemen's sexual prowess and polygamous practices. Each spring, according to the Norman chronicler Dudo of Saint Quentin, the Vikings held wild, promiscuous ceremonies, a practice that led to more babies every winter. But there was more to the shifting dynamics than Viking promiscuity.

At the time of the Vikings, Scandinavia was not thickly populated; no more than 2 million people could have been living there at the dawn of the ninth century. But the climate was changing in Europe. By CE 800, the continent's northern sections were noticeably warmer than in the past, and the glaciers that scoured Scandinavia were in retreat, creating more arable land and extending the growing season. The winters grew shorter and milder. In the past, a long, hard winter often meant that food ran out, so the old, sick, and very young died before spring came. The warmer climate meant more survivors: hordes of young Viking men,

competing for land and stature, and eager to prove themselves wherever adventure would take them.

Finally, the easing of the winter changed the way the Norse ate, making the people stronger and healthier. Their herds and flocks grew fat and multiplied. People ate more meat and with their increased energy caught more fish. Vikings were physically bigger than their foes, and in the retelling of their conquests were portrayed as towering giants. “Never did I see a people so gigantic,” Ibn Fadlan wrote. “They are tall as palm trees.” Allowing for hyperbole, forensics bear this out. Male skeletons in Scandinavian graveyards of the period average five feet eight inches, an impressive height at a time when few others stood taller than five feet five.

The Viking adventurers were also propelled by their native wanderlust and a growing taste for wealth. To them, the open seas were siren songs. And on the sea, they were invincible.

When the Vikings began their long-distance raids, most Europeans rarely ventured beyond walking distance of the villages in which they were born. Travel was difficult and dangerous. But the Vikings were different. While other cultures feared the sea, to the Vikings it was an open road to power and wealth. From the fjords and rock-strewn harbors along the Scandinavian coast, the Vikings roared forth. It was as if they were born to be amphibious, with salt water in their veins.

“The Danes,” observed an early medieval chronicler, “live in the sea.” This description also fit the Swedes and Norwegians, whose affinity for seafaring came not simply from wanderlust but from generations of learning to thrive in their watery environs. The icy waters of Scandinavia - rich in cod, haddock, mackerel, tuna, and shellfish –

provided their daily nourishment. To reach this plentiful fare, they had begun by building primitive dugouts and skin boats. But over time, they refined the craft of shipbuilding to include designs that produced ships sturdy enough to give them the confidence to leave land far behind.

There are rock carvings dating as far back as 1500 BCE that depict Norse ships. The high-curved, pointed stem and stern are already present, as is the shallow draft, essential to navigating the shoals and turbulent waters of the North. This ship design known today as a double-ender was uniquely Scandinavian. The shape allowed the boat to cope with large waves from either front or back, while the shallow draft gave it greater stability and allowed it to glide on top of the sea rather than plunge the depths with its keel.

The Norsemen's sleek craft were among the finest technological developments of the Early Middle Ages. As evidenced from a number of unearthed ships, including those buried intact as funerary chambers, the typical Viking war-galley was a thirty-oared vessel without a deck, averaging about seventy feet long and sixteen feet at the beam. Such a craft could reach about ten miles per hour under its one huge square sail; it could accommodate nearly 100 men and women, yet be handled on the open sea by as few as fifteen. It was nimble enough to skirt shore defenses, capacious enough for lucrative plundering expeditions, and sturdy enough to survive stormy Atlantic crossings. Its shallow draft let it navigate far inland on the rivers of Europe, and it was light enough to be portaged between rivers or past fortified bridges.

And the warship was only one of the sophisticated Viking designs. A collection of five remarkably preserved vessels was found in the mud of a Danish fjord where they had

been sunk to form a defensive reef. The two warships, a fishing boat, a seagoing cargo carrier, and a coastal trading vessel - each adapted for its specific purpose - confirms their shipbuilding prowess.

To the Vikings, their ships were more than the perfect vehicle for warfare and trade. They were revered possessions on which they lavished the best of their vigorous art, carving awesome figureheads of dragons or wild animals and adding wooden or metal trim exquisitely worked with abstract designs. Their preliterate bards apostrophized the ship and handed down by word of mouth a vivid poetry glorifying the feats of those who challenged the sea. Nowhere is the Viking’s exultation in his ship more graphically expressed than in the great epic of the Scandinavian hero Beowulf:

He gave command for a goodly vessel

Fitted and furnished . . .

Came the hour of boarding; the boat was riding

The waves of the harbor under the hill.

The eager mariners mounted the prow;

Billows were breaking, sea against sand.

In the ship’s hold snugly they stowed their trappings,

Gleaming armor and battle-gear;

Launched the vessel, the well-braced bark,

Seaward bound on a joyous journey.

Over breaking billows, with bellying sail

And foamy beak, like a flying bird

The ship sped on. . . .

The freedom these ships gave the Vikings helped to shape their character almost as much as the northland's long nights, harsh winters, and bleak terrain.

The Vikings were also extremely adaptable, a trait that came in handy in exploration and warfare.

These creatures of rural Scandinavia, where villages were few and sparse, became canny town builders when necessity demanded. In Ireland, for example, they created a system of market towns up and down the coast that linked the country's agriculture to a larger trading network. They built settlements in the rich fields of Normandy and along the bleak Icelandic coast, and enjoyed lives full of diversity - from hunting whales and walruses to sampling the exotic pleasures of the court in Constantinople.

For better and for worse, the Vikings were also fervent individualists. Their tribal societies recognized kings, noblemen, freemen, and slaves, yet they stoutly and illogically maintained, "We are all equal." All too often, they proved their independence and their disdain for authority by drowning a king or deposing him by some equally violent means. The essence of their spirit is well summed up in a saga in which a Viking warrior describes his religion. He might have said that he worships warlike gods and nature-spirits; instead, he voices a greater truth: "I believe in my own strength."

The Vikings were archetypal barbarians. Not only did they condone polygamy and worship heathen deities such as Odin, god of war and wisdom, and the storm-god Thor, they

often made sport of their killing and occasionally practiced human sacrifice.

In battle, the Vikings displayed a terrifying ferocity that blinded them to danger and rendered them uncontrollable. During the earlier Viking raids, they did not fight as a cohesive unit, but more as a disorderly mob. The English word “berserk” stems from *berserkr*, the name of a type of Norse warrior who charged into battle in a frenzy that made him oblivious to his own wounds - and to his leaders’ commands.

The Vikings set no premium on indiscriminate killing but had a fine contempt for anyone who displayed weakness or showed mercy to the enemy. One warrior, for instance, won from his shipmates the scornful nickname, “the children’s man,” because he declined to partake in their sport of tossing the babies of conquered enemies into the air and catching them on the point of a spear. Many tales of Viking atrocities were no doubt exaggerated by their victims, but it seems clear that the Northmen had even fewer scruples than their Germanic precursors.

Initially, as they began to foray south toward the wealth of the rest of Europe, the Vikings were a single people – they had not yet divided into Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian. They all spoke Old Norse, and their lives were much the same, centering on farming and the sea.

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The Vikings are related to the Germanic tribes that spread across Europe between the first and fifth centuries CE, but their roots go deeper. Early ancestors of the Norsemen can be traced back more than 5,000 years; even then, they were already exploring the extensive coasts and waterways

of Scandinavia. They were nomadic hunters, constantly on the move in search of game, fish, and aquatic mammals such as seals, porpoises, and whales.

Over time, these hunters were joined by other migrants and began planting crops to supplement what they pulled from the sea. As they settled down to form more permanent societies, they began trading with the nations and peoples to the south, exchanging flint and amber for gold, copper, and tin.

Viking farmers of the era would have sown oats, barley, rye and perhaps cabbage. Their farms would also be stocked with livestock – cattle, goats, pigs, sheep, and geese. At the center of the farm would be a large building where the extended family and perhaps a few slaves lived. These houses were built with whatever was available: timber and stone, sod, wattle and daub, or sometimes a combination of some or all of these materials.

These farms and their farmers, who were linked by shared ancestors, formed small Viking communities that dotted the flatlands near the water, with the mountains behind them.

Despite their intimate connections, the people of these villages did not always get along. According to the sagas, hostilities regularly simmered below the surface; once ignited, violence would erupt in a wave of bloodshed. Each strike required vengeance, and each act of retribution kept the fight raging, sometimes for generations.

In one saga, Thord Andreassson, having fallen into the hands of his enemy, Gizur, says, “I would ask this of you, that you forgive me for whatever I have done against you.” Replies Gizur, “That I will do as soon as you are dead,” and he sinks his ax into his enemy’s neck.

Viking women were just as ferocious. They were also hardheaded and tough, capable of running the family farm while the men were away at sea or debilitated after a fight. They, too, defended their family's honor in the feuds and fights that consumed their fathers, brothers, and husbands.

Around CE 850, the dawn of the Viking Age, the Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes embarked on separate courses that would take them thousands of miles – to Byzantium in one direction and America in the other.

The Rus from Sweden, who had already begun to raid along the rivers of Eastern Europe, were equally interested in trade and in plunder. With their best customers located far to the south in the rich caliphate of Baghdad, they penetrated deeper and deeper into Russia to reduce the number of middlemen needed and to buy the luxuries they wanted for themselves - bronze, glass, silks, and silver. The Rus sold furs and slaves; the first came from the forests of their homeland, the second from the Slavic tribes they raided on their travels. ("Slav" is the origin of the English word "slave").

From the end of the eighth century on, the ships of the Rus nosed past the coasts of Finland, up the Baltic rivers into the east Russian plain, and down the Volga. As time went on, many of them settled in Russia. A Viking named Rurik built a prosperous trading post based at Novgorod, some 125 miles south of St. Petersburg. In 880, Rurik's successor Oleg captured Kiev and took control of the trade route stretching from the Gulf of Finland to the Black Sea. Novgorod, Kiev, Rostov, Smolensk, and other commercial centers founded or captured by the Rus played a significant part in the merging of the country's miscellaneous Slavic tribes into a political whole. They became the "Russian"

state – its name underscores the importance of the Viking contribution.

The Danish and Norwegian Vikings, predictably, turned southward and westward. Their favored targets were France and England, although the more adventurous went well beyond, even penetrating the Mediterranean to attack Seville and Cádiz. One year, a band wintered in southern France, and the next spring, rested and refreshed, sailed on to Italy, where it sacked Pisa.

The Northmen had by this time become established as rulers, traders, and landowners in Ireland, and their attacks on the Frankish kingdom were unfailingly successful. They effectively controlled much of the land along the North Sea coast, and their raids up the Seine and Loire rivers stripped the countryside of its wealth and decimated its defenders. They first reached Paris in 845, and attacked the city three more times during the 860s. In 885, the Norsemen besieged Paris, starving many citizens and burning much of the city.

Unable to stop the Vikings by force, their victims tried other tactics. Sometimes they hired another group of Vikings to help fend off their brothers. Unfortunately, these mercenaries had a tendency to go off on their own. In 862, Vikings hired by the count of Anjou to fight other Vikings went on to loot and burn an abbey and then to hold the city of Poitiers for ransom.

Eventually, the king of France decided that since it was impossible to beat the Danish Vikings, he would make them his partners. In 911, Charlemagne’s grandson Charles the Simple (also known as the Bald) proved anything but simple: He ennobled the leader of a powerful band of Danes, Rollo, who had besieged Paris and Chartres, making

him the first duke of Normandy – a province by then so dominated by Norse settlers that it had acquired their name. In exchange, Rollo swore allegiance to the crown and helped France fend off other Vikings. Although his warriors weren't turned into well-behaved citizens overnight, time and intermarriage with local women gradually transformed them from Norsemen to Normans. A century later, Rollo's descendant, William the Conqueror, invaded and took over England.

The ennobling of Rollo notwithstanding, the most common practice in tenth-century Christendom was to buy the Danes off. This swiftly degenerated into blackmail, as the Danes insisted on regular payments called Danegeld, the Viking version of protection money. The amount of treasure the Vikings pocketed this way was astronomical. In a frank acknowledgement of their powerlessness, the Anglo-Saxons counseled each other, "Buy off the spear aimed at your breast if you do not wish to feel its point." But if paying Danegeld was an ignoble expedient, it proved constructive in more ways than one. It not only moderated "the wrath of the Northmen"; it also brought Viking and victim into a *modus vivendi* that would eventually help reconcile them.

In the mid-ninth century, the Viking objective in England changed: No longer mere raiders, the Danes and Norwegians had become intent on occupation and conquest. In 865, what historians call the Great Heathen Army, led by the wily Ivar the Boneless and his brother Halfdan, landed on the east coast and spent the next ten years campaigning across the length and breadth of England. By 878, their conquered territory embraced much of central and eastern England, an area known to the vanquished Britons as the Danelaw. For more than a century, warfare was endemic between the Danelaw and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the

south and west, as well as in the Norwegian-occupied areas in the English northwest.

It was Alfred the Great who ultimately stabilized the tempestuous situation and, with his son and grandson, neutralized the Danes. Over the next century, the raiders stopped coming and the Vikings in the Danelaw gradually became all but indistinguishable from their British neighbors - who themselves were picking up more than a few Norse customs, traits, and even bits of language: “Wednesday,” “Thursday,” and “Friday,” for instance, all derive from the names of the Norse gods Odin, Thor, and Freyr.

But the Viking threat to England wasn’t over. Nearly a century after Alfred’s death, in 994, the Norwegians, under the famous Olaf Tryggvesson, and the Danes, under the equally renowned Sven Forkbeard, joined forces to invade England again. The English king, Aethelred II - dubbed Aethelred the Unready - paid them 16,000 pounds of silver to go away. In 1016, Sven’s son Knud (also known as Canute) set the record for collecting Danegeld. In the process of bringing all of England under his sway, he took 10,500 pounds of silver from London alone and 72,000 pounds from the rest of the country. He kept some of the loot for himself and divided the rest among his retainers.

These latter-day Vikings ultimately sailed back north. Fifty years later, when the Normans took over England, the people they vanquished were a blend of Anglo-Saxons and their own ancestors, now a breed uniquely their own: Britons.

The last great Viking adventure was to stretch all the way to America. As usual, their forays were a testimony to their courage and shipbuilding technology. But it was also proof of their astonishing mastery of a science that was then little

known even to sophisticated Arab and Oriental mathematicians: open-ocean navigation.

While Vikings from every region were excellent sailors, they were aided by the currents that helped move ships in the northern seas. The Norwegian Current, which surges powerfully up the coast of Norway, steered seafaring vessels toward the Lofoten Islands and then west toward Iceland. From there, ships could ride the Irminger Current westward toward Greenland, where they could pick up the East and West Greenland currents. On that side of the Atlantic, the Labrador Current eased them down the coast of North America. And these currents were boosted by seasonal winds that blew from east to west between Norway and Iceland and north to south between Iceland and the tip of Greenland.

To anyone looking at a large-scale map, the helpful currents and winds would seem to make it simple to sail from Scandinavia to America. But the Vikings were out on the open ocean, beset by storms and fog, with only water stretching for hundreds of miles in all directions. Compasses had been invented in China, but they wouldn’t reach Europe for another three centuries. In constantly shifting winds, how did the seamen know which way to sail? The answer: The Vikings supplemented generations of seafaring experience with sophisticated tools that historians have only recently begun to understand.

First they relied on lore about currents, tides, the behavior of birds and sea mammals, and landmarks visible far out at sea. Then they could read the stars. On clear nights, the North Star, Polaris, was always visible, and a captain could use the star’s position in the sky to set a course. Keeping Polaris at a fixed elevation on the port or starboard side of

the ship, for example, would set a course due east or west. This would come to be known as latitude sailing.

Sailing down the coast of Scandinavia, Polaris would drop lower toward the horizon to the rear as the vessel moved south. By measuring the North Star's altitude, Vikings could determine how far north or south they had traveled.

By day, the Vikings could hold to their east-west course using the sun as their guiding star. This was more complex, since the sun's altitude varies with the seasons, but a steady course could be maintained by using one of those recently uncovered tools, the sun shadow board. This was a wooden disc marked with concentric circles that stood for latitudes. In the center of the disc was a vertical shaft - similar to that of a sundial - that could be raised or lowered to match the sun's seasonal altitude at noon. When set to the sun's declination in mid-August, for example, the shaft's shadow would fall between two of the concentric circles. The shadow would move as the sun crossed the sky, but by keeping the shadow within that same track, the navigator could maintain a steady course east or west at the same latitude. To keep the instrument level at sea, a sailor was assigned to hold it floating in a bowl of water.

If the sun wasn't visible due to clouds or fog, the seafarers used what they called sunstones – crystals made of cordierite, a gemstone found in Iceland and Scandinavia. When held at a right angle to polarized sunlight, the crystal instantly changes color from yellow to dark blue, showing the navigator the sun's exact position even in pea-soup conditions. What's more, it could detect the sun's rays even when the sun was slightly below the horizon, allowing navigators to work even at dusk or before dawn.

The sun shadow board was central to Viking navigation; directions invariably began from locations where latitude had been established. Geography helped. Iceland was on the same latitude as the Trondheim Fjord. Bergen, on the west coast of Norway, was in line with the Shetland Islands and Cape Farewell in Greenland. This knowledge allowed the Norse to set a relatively accurate course, and if they stuck to it, they would get close enough to their targeted destination to use visual observations – a mountain or a flock of land-based birds - to get them to harbor.

Using the sun and stars as guides, the Vikings fearlessly set out across the seas. Only after hundreds of years, and the arrival of the compass, would the great explorers of Portugal and Spain attempt such daring feats.

One of the most audacious Norse mariners was Erik Thorvaldsson Raudi - Erik the Red. He was a towering hulk of a Viking, a true barbarian, a murderously bad neighbor, and a scoundrel on a grand scale. He was also an exceptional leader of men, and his devoted crew – and later others - would follow him to the end of the world. Cast out by his own society and driven by his contrary nature, Erik looked west. He founded a settlement on the edge of Greenland's ice cap that would survive for nearly five centuries.

Erik the Red was the embodiment of the spirit of the Vikings. Born around 950 on a farm in southwest Norway, Erik, when still a teenager, became involved in his father Thorvald's blood feud that resulted, according to a saga, in "some killings." They and their families were banished to Iceland, a fate that had befallen other Norwegian troublemakers.

They came to the remote island at a bad time. Iceland had been settled in the 870s, but by the time the two men arrived, most of the good land was spoken for, and they were forced to settle on the nearly barren northwestern coast. Thorvald soon died, and Erik was left to fend for himself. He married Thjodhild, the daughter of a prosperous farmer, and started a family. But domesticity failed to tame him, and he soon became embroiled in several feuds, one of which had disastrous consequences. A confrontation with his neighbor, Valthjof, began when Erik's slaves started a landslide on Valthjof's farm that crushed Valthjof's house. In retaliation, Valthjof's friend Eyjiolf the Foul killed the hapless slaves. Infuriated, Erik killed Eyjiolf and one of his confederates, an act that led to his banishment from Iceland for a period of three years.

According to custom, he was given a few days to pack up his belongings. He bought and stocked a *knarr*, a short and sturdy boat designed mainly for coastal trading, and set about recruiting other men desperate enough to accompany him on an adventure. Times were hard in Iceland, so they were not hard to find. (A few years before, a famine had struck in which, according to a chronicler, "men ate ravens and foxes, and many loathsome things were eaten that should not be eaten, and some men had the old and helpless killed and thrown over the cliffs.")

Erik knew - more or less - where he wanted to go. About fifty years earlier, sometime between 900 and 930, a man named Gunnbjorn Ulf-Krakason had been blown off course by a tremendous gale while sailing from Norway to Iceland. Missing the island altogether, his ship was flung far to the west. Eventually, he sighted a cluster of skerries – tiny rock islands, too small to be inhabitable – and in the dim distance, what appeared to be an enormous piece of land. But the place looked so desolate that Gunnbjorn contented

himself with simply naming the islets (*Gunnbjarnarsker*, after himself), then turned back and sailed for Iceland.

Icelandic mariners had talked and speculated often about Gunnbjorn's islands, and at least one, a man named Snaebjorn Galti, made an attempt to retrace the route. Setting out in 978 with a companion boat, Snaebjorn and his associates pushed past the skerries and made camp on a tiny shelf of land on the coast of Greenland, where they built a small house. But the icecap of the monstrous island, devoid of vegetation, provided little sustenance; the group survived – barely – on the few fish they were able to catch. When the arctic winter came like a hammer and the snow buried their house so deep that they had to dig upward to get out, the starving men turned on each other. By spring, three of them, including Snaebjorn, had been killed. The survivors made it back to Iceland to tell the tale.

In spite of that woeful precedent, the exiled Erik the Red decided that he, too, would venture west.

He set sail in 982. His destination was roughly 450 miles away, not particularly far with the wind in his favor. Erik steered his boat along the sixty-fifth parallel, and after four days or so, there appeared before the men a hulking monstrosity of ice, blinding beneath the sun. Along the edge were sheer cliffs, and poking through the sheet of ice were huge mountains. It was enough to strike fear even in the heart of a Viking. Seeing no other alternative, Erik the Red headed south, eventually rounding what has become Cape Farewell, Greenland, at the extreme tip of the landmass. Carefully, he sailed through a maze of steep-walled channels strewn with rocky islands until he found the western coast.

Now he headed north, snaking along the coast, following the hairpins of the fjords in his *knarr.* The men heard the piercing shrieks of millions of birds and the booming thunder of icebergs calving from the glaciers that ran to the sea.

The fjords cut deep into the west coast, in some cases stretching more than 150 miles from the sea. Fish were abundant, and the shores were covered with grass and wildflowers. At the top of one such fjord, they made camp. Not surprisingly, Erik named their new home Eriksfjord.

They weren't the first on the scene. When Erik and his companions arrived, no one was living on Greenland, but others, non-Europeans, had been here earlier. The Vikings found ruins of houses, boat fragments, and stone tools. Today we know that men had been in Greenland as early as 2000 BCE, camping and hunting reindeer. These people were eventually replaced by what has come to be called the Dorset culture, named for Cape Dorset in Canada's Nunavut Territory. These ancestors of today's Inuit people survived by hunting seals. It was only after the Viking colony was founded that the nomads returned to set up new colonies, on the west coast to the north of Erik's settlement.

Erik and his fellow Norsemen, then, were at least the third group to inhabit the vast island. While their colony would not survive, it was not for lack of trying. After his exile from Iceland had expired, Erik chose to remain in his new land, traveling east only to reunite with his wife, Thjodhild, and bring her to their new home. He also rounded up as many settlers as he could, boasting of the supposed riches of the new land, which he called "Greenland." Like any good real estate developer, Erik picked the name to contrast with the bleakness of Iceland, explaining forthrightly that "men

would be drawn to go there if the land had an attractive name."

In 986, Erik the Red sailed from Iceland at the head of a fleet of twenty-five ships filled with men, women, children, and all their possessions. After a fierce storm, only fourteen ships reached their destination;, however – the others turned back to Iceland or were lost at sea. –Still, nearly 400 people went ashore to begin the colonization of Greenland.

Immediately, these hardy pioneers went to work. Unlike Iceland, Greenland had good stone for building, and the barns and houses that Erik and his settlers constructed were thick-walled with sod roofs. These initial homesteads were scattered along a 120-mile stretch of shoreline on the west coast that would come to be known as the Eastern Settlement. Three hundred miles up the coast, and farther west, another cluster of homes was built ten years later and was named the Western Settlement. The colonists would adopt a constitution, establish a parliamentary body, and draw up a code of law adapted from the one used in Iceland. By CE 1100, just before its decline, the island's population would reach about 3,000 people.

By and large, the settlers were not feuding scrappers like their leader. They were farmers in search of new lands to plow, which were in short supply in Iceland. For a while, they were remarkably successful; even faraway Norwegians heard of the bounty of Erik's Greenland. "It is reported," wrote a chronicler there, "that the pasturage is good and that there are large and fine farms in Greenland. The farmers raise sheep and cattle in large numbers and make butter and cheese in great quantities. The people subsist chiefly on these foods and on beef; they also eat the flesh of various kinds of game, such as caribou, whale, seal, and bear."

Archeological evidence shows that the colonists worked hard to build colossal barns to shelter their prized livestock and steadily improved the land, manuring their fields to improve crop yields. But Greenlanders could never be truly self-sufficient, and many of their needs could be filled only through trading. To get the goods they wanted, the Greenlanders had to have something of value to offer. They found that it in the great mammals and other creatures that lived in the waters along the rugged west coast.

The largest catch was the Greenland whale, seventy feet of meat and oil. There were seals, which made up the largest major part of the colonists' diet, along with polar bears and immense flocks of eider ducks, whose down would fill the quilts of Europe.

But the greatest prize was the tusked walrus. Its ivory was a high-value item, easily packed for shipping to the markets of northern Europe, where it was prized for the carving of both religious and secular ornaments. The Greenlanders went on annual summer hunts when herds of walrus gathered in Disko Bay, some 300 miles north of the Western Settlement. Greenland was the prime source of ivory in Europe for at least 200 years. And the trade was profitable: According to a document dated 1327, a single boatload of 200 walrus tusks, Greenland's tribute to the king of Norway for a six-year period, was worth more than all the woolen cloth sent by the 4,000 farms of Iceland for the same six-year tribute.

With that stable source of income, the Greenland settlements enjoyed a comfortable level of prosperity. Erik the Red was satisfied. And yet, there were disturbances in his remote community. More settlers arrived, straining resources. And the newcomers brought something else: Christianity.

Thjodhild, Erik's wife, was a convert, and she badgered her husband into building a chapel. In time, it would grow to a substantial cathedral, complete with a bishop and a bronze bell. But Erik continued to seek guidance and favor from the gods he knew, Thor and Odin. His punishment was exile from his wife's bed. It's no surprise that these indignities had Erik looking for a less crowded, less rigid society where a man could be truly free.

Like most Icelanders, Erik knew that there was land to be found even farther west than Greenland. The story of a man named Bjarni Herjolfsson had been making the rounds in Iceland for years. It was said that he had come upon the coast of North America after stormy weather pushed his ship past Greenland. Erik's interest in following up on Bjarni's exploration was high, but as an old man now, he was not up to making the trip himself. The task fell to his son Leif.

Leif Eriksson, described in one saga as "a big, strapping fellow, handsome to look at, thoughtful and temperate in all things," was up to the challenge. He was a fine sailor, as he had proved several times already by taking ships bearing trade goods from Greenland to Scotland and Norway. The round trip was 1,800 miles of open sea, sailing mainly along the sixtieth parallel. He was brave but not rash. He liked to plan, and before setting sail to the west, he sought out Bjarni and quizzed him extensively about what he had seen – currents, landmarks, shoals – anything that might be useful. By the summer of 1001, Leif was ready. He bought Bjarni's ship, assembled a crew of thirty-five, and set out, following Herjolfsson's course as best he could.

Their first stop west of Greenland was most likely Baffin Island (Leif called it *Helluland*, or Flat Rock Land), the largest island in the vast Canadian Arctic Archipelago. Due

to its inhospitable climate – the average daily temperature is - 16.5 degrees Fahrenheit – and its rocky and glaciated terrain, the explorers moved on quickly.

Finally, they arrived at the place Bjarni had spoken of. The beach was white sand and beyond it lay a vast forest, thick with enough wood to build an armada. Historians believe this was near Cape Porcupine on Labrador's southeast coast. Leif named it Markland, or Land of Forests.

Venturing south, they landed in a few days on what is now Belle Isle, some fifteen miles north of Newfoundland, just east of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. They made camp along the interior of Cape Bauld, at the northern tip of Newfoundland, and decided to stay for the winter. The rivers and lakes teemed with salmon. They reported that the days were longer than in Greenland or Iceland and that theat grass barely died in the cold, which would allow cattle to graze year-round. It was a land of abundance. After Leif's thrall (servant), Tyrker, a man he refers to in his saga as his foster-father, discovered vines laden with grapes, Leif called it Vinland.

Leif planned to establish a permanent settlement in Vinland, but he would not be one of the settlers. During his return to Greenland, Erik the Red died, and Leif took over the family farm. In his place, Leif's brother Thorvald stepped in to continue exploring Vinland. He and his crew sailed west, following Leif's route, but they made it only as far as Newfoundland, where they spent the winter subsisting on fish.

Thorvald explored the coast when spring arrived, using his ship's small boat. He saw little that interested him, and he and his men spent a second winter in Labrador. He repeated the process the following year, this time using the main

ship. Its keel had been broken in a storm, but was replaced with the readily available timber. The old keel was set in the sand as a marker.

Until now, there had been few problems on this expedition. But that was about to change. The crew came upon three skin boats – small, wooden-framed canoes, covered with sealskin - on a beach with their owners asleep beneath them. True to form, the Vikings attacked the strangers, killing two of them. The third man escaped, but soon returned with a host of other natives, in a rage and out for revenge. It's interesting to speculate how history might have changed had the Greenlanders tried a friendlier approach, perhaps leading to trade, cultural exchanges, and peaceful colonization on the soil of North America. But the Vikings despised the Native Americans, just as they did the Inuit when they arrived in Greenland. The Norse name for all of them was *skraelings*, which translates as wretches.

The Vikings' brisk, casual brutality triggered disaster. With arrows raining down on them, Thorvald and his crew fled to their ship, seeking safety behind a gunwale. Thorvald was struck in the armpit and died. He was buried alongside the upright keel. The remaining Norsemen returned to Greenland the next spring. A saga reports, with customary understatement, that they had "plenty of news to tell Leif."

Finally, in 1009, another attempt was made to establish a settlement in Vinland, this time by an Icelander known as Thorfinn the Valiant. Aboard Thorfinn's three ships were 250 people, including at least five women. They set up their colony on the northern tip of Newfoundland, where first Leif, and later Thorvald, had spent a winter. In modern times, the site, called L'Anse aux Meadows, was discovered only in 1960.

The winter was harsh, with the colonists fending off ravenous bears who attacked their livestock. Sailing south, they found a small, sheltered bay where there seemed to be good pasture land. They tried to trade with the natives, but the commerce didn't go well. They fought, and the Vikings narrowly escaped. That would be the pattern for the remaining two years of Viking habitation in America. The land was rich, but there were so many problems with the tribes that the colonists gradually drifted back to Greenland. According to some accounts, however, even after the settlement withered, the Vikings continued to visit America to harvest trees for masts and keels.

The settlers in Greenland had problems of their own, many of them caused by the weather. Around 1200, the climate turned colder as the North Atlantic entered its Little Ice Age. As temperatures dropped, the amount of sea ice increased dramatically. That made getting in and out of Greenland much more hazardous, endangering the trading economy.

Perhaps most critical, the market for walrus ivory dried up. The Black Death was ravaging Europe, and half the population of Norway succumbed to it. Demand for ivory declined, and on top of that, Portuguese traders had reached sub-Saharan Africa and opened up a trade in elephant ivory, which was more desirable than walrus tusks. The Greenlanders sought a lifeline from Norway, giving up independence in return for trade concessions. Norway agreed, but then reneged on the deal. A year later, Iceland was forced to do the same, also with disappointing results. But the neglected Icelandic settlements would survive. Greenland's would not.

No one knows what ultimately happened to the colony and its inhabitants. There is evidence that at least some homesteads were carefully closed up and abandoned, as the

settlers apparently prepared to board ships for Iceland or Norway. But others may have held on to the bitter end, enduring a sadder fate. The last traces of the Vikings' dream were found on what had once been a farm in the Eastern Settlement. There was a barrel, filled with the bones of 100 mice that had climbed in to drink milk and then could not get out. Nearby was the skeleton of a Norseman, who died in a field with no one left to bury him.

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8

"I AM BOUND TO SERVE YOU AND RESPECT YOU"

IN FEUDALISM'S GRIP

One final major force helped shape the barbarian era – and, by extension, the evolution of modern Europe: feudalism, which sculpted the social pyramid from the king down to the lowliest peasant.

In fact, the feudal society in Europe overlapped two eras, appearing halfway through the Early Middle Ages and lasting into the Renaissance. It had many forms and variations, differing from one land to the next - and never taking full hold in Spain and Italy. But feudalism was dominant in France, Germany, and later in Britain, and was the glue that held society together.

The feudal era was built on two basic factors: land and loyalty.

In a society without money, land held the only true value – but oddly, after the fall of the Empire, nobody actually owned the land. In practice, all of it was appropriated by the reigning king of the territory he controlled. As the tribal rulers consolidated their power, they would allocate the land, keeping some for themselves - but passing out the rest to their relatives, to their main war leaders, to powerful clerics, and to their favorites or valued advisors. All - in return for their loyal services.

In theory, the land was still the king's, with the barons as lifetime landlords; when one of them died, the land reverted to the crown. But in practice, possession soon became hereditary, and the nobles who held land didn't hesitate to pass on smaller parcels to their own retainers. When either the king or the landlord died, the bargain would be renewed with the next generation.

In return for his generosity, what the king expected – and got – was loyalty. Personal service was part of it; a landlord

promised to provide a number of warriors to fight the king's battles for a certain number of days per year. The favored noble was also expected to provide hospitality for the king and his retinue whenever he chose to visit, and perhaps to provide grain, meat, cloth or other supplies from the produce of the estate.

But the heart of the bargain was loyalty, and the obligation was mutual. The landlord became the king's vassal, a warrior and servant loyal to the death, and the king would be his protective overlord. Along with the land, the king granted his royal favor, respect, and whatever support he could provide when his vassal needed it.

This relationship had roots in both Roman and barbarian societies. Romans practiced patronage, in which wealthy or powerful citizens could have less fortunate ones as clients; in one notable example, a Roman might free his slaves but retain them as servile dependents. And as the western Roman Empire decayed and crumbled in the fifth and sixth centuries, its taxes became so burdensome that many small farmers were forced to turn over title to their land to wealthier men and become, in effect, sharecroppers. Later, the Empire grew less and less able to guarantee its citizens' safety.

Threatened by outlaws or just the violence and greed of their neighbors, defenseless men would appeal to a powerful figure for protection, and would become warriors at his disposal or members of his bodyguard, bolstering his power and authority. As the Empire withered, so did the trade it had encouraged, and with it the towns and cities that had grown up as trade centers. Refugees from the dying urban centers joined farmers and free warriors in seeking service with local lords.

Centuries earlier, as the Germanic tribes fought their way south, they had developed the same kind of relationship between free men. Each tribe could have several bands of "war companions," consisting of a prominent chieftain and his personal followers. The crew depended on the chief for the fighting prowess, leadership, and plunder he provided, and as long as he was winning, he had their total loyalty. The most successful of these chieftains became the leader and ultimately the king of the tribe, with the lesser chiefs as his lieutenants and counselors, who also provided loyalty in return for favor and protection.

The Roman and Germanic traditions blended neatly into what became feudalism, with vassalage and land grants as its centerpiece. After Clovis I died early in the sixth century, the Merovingian kings who succeeded him extended the vassalage system to replace the vanished Roman bureaucracy. They filled administrative posts, both secular and clerical, with men who had sworn solemn oaths of fealty, making each office a lifetime grant conditioned only on loyalty. This worked, but contributed hugely to the corruption and inefficiency that plagued the Merovingian years.

In the eighth century, Charlemagne's grandfather Charles Martel formalized the system of land grants by passing out parcels to great lords explicitly as lifetime favors, to be used to raise troops and supplies to fight the Moors invading from Spain. These land grants, payments for wartime service, became known as fiefs, and ultimately followed the same trajectory as the earlier grants of territory, effectively becoming hereditary as the power of the nobility waxed and the kings got weaker.

Martel also contributed unwittingly to the next evolution of feudalism with his triumph over the Moors at the Battle of

Poitiers in 732. That was a cavalry victory, and overnight, it established the cavalry as the key component of any medieval army.

That event transformed the foundation of the feudal system.

A small farmer who had formerly been a vassal of the local landlord, serving as a foot soldier for part of the year, now had to have a horse, and that wasn't cheap. The historian Gerald Simons found a legal record of a farm and slave being traded for a horse and sword: Apparently, someone who had contrived to own his farm had decided to trade it in to become a full-time cavalryman in the service of a lord. The landlords themselves now had to equip their numerous bodyguards with horses, and many of them solved this problem by splitting off parcels of their fiefs to give each warrior a large enough tract to be able to afford his own horse, tack, and supplies. By the tenth century, the lowly warriors thus enriched were on the way to becoming a new phenomenon: knights.

Charlemagne followed the Merovingian practice, installing his vassals as bureaucrats to run the kingdom that he doubled in size, and he took pains to make sure they didn't abuse their power. But his son Louis the Pious was less successful, and between the kingdom's unwieldy size and the marauding of the Vikings, the French crown had become virtually powerless fifty years after Charlemagne's death in 814. What had been his kingdom broke into a patchwork of large and small baronies, duchies, counties, and principalities, each with its ruler presiding over a network of subordinate vassals and their own sworn retainers. And the tenth century, nearing the end of Europe's barbarian era, was the classical age of feudalism.

Now the ceremony of fealty for a new vassal reached its most elaborate incarnation.

The first stage was the ritual of *homage*, the vassal's formal act of subordination: He knelt hatless before his *seigneur*, with his hands folded within the lord's hands. Next the vassal swore with his hand on the Bible to serve his master faithfully: "I will love what thou lovest; I will hate what thou hatest. . . . As long as I shall live, I am bound to serve you and respect you. . . . Thy friends will be my friends, thy enemies my enemies." And finally, the lord presented his vassal with a fief for his services, perhaps handing him a clod of earth from the granted land as a token.

The basic structure of feudalism was as informal and imprecise as the oaths were elaborate. The great barons, dukes and counts had no real claim to civic power; they didn't even own the land they parceled out and then kept ruling. Themselves vassals of kings who had lost their power, they relied on vassals to serve and defend them, with lesser vassals serving those vassals, and the whole structure was based on the labor of the peasants at the bottom, who were treated as serfs on no more justification than their ignorance and poverty. But it worked because, at every level, they all needed each other. In a precarious society in which no one was safe, the feudal structure provided a modicum of security.

And feudal relationships could be surprisingly deep, tinged with the moral and spiritual tone that would later evolve into the ideals of chivalry. In 843, a Frankish noblewoman named Dhuoda wrote her son William after he became a vassal of King Charles the Bald. "Since God, as I believe, and your father Bernard have chosen you, in the flower of your youth, to serve Charles as your lord," she told him, "I urge you ever to remember the record of your family,

illustrious on both sides, and not to serve your master simply to satisfy him outwardly, but to maintain toward him and his service in all things a devoted and certain fealty both of body and soul."

At its peak in the tenth century, feudalism had yet to take full root in England; William the Conqueror would tend to that after 1066. But the institution would continue to flourish on the Continent, sometimes to the point of ludicrousness, for another four centuries. It became common, for instance, for ambitious men to swear vassalage to multiple lords. That risked punishment, disgrace, and the terrible sin of oath-breaking if two of the lords should call on their vassal for support on opposite sides of a dispute. But the rewards were tempting, in the form of fiefs and favors. At one point, Theobald II, Count of Champagne, put together an enormous estate by swearing fealty to, and receiving fiefs from, not just the king of France but also the German emperor, the duke of Burgundy, two archbishops, four bishops, and an abbot. (Sure enough, he got embroiled in a war against Louis VII of France.)

By the eleventh century, however, the feudal society itself was on the wane, to be replaced by a new and vibrant evolution across the Continent. The incomplete chronicles of the time don't clarify all the causes, but basic factors were changing. For the first time in centuries, the number of births was exceeding total deaths, and populations were rising. Farmers began cultivating land that had gone unused for centuries, cutting down large tracts of forest, and using a three-field system of crop rotation to raise yields. Crucial new technology came into use with the heavy wheeled plow, whose deep furrows also benefited crops, and the water wheel, which harnessed the power of rivers and streams to mill grain and cut lumber.

More bountiful crops freed some peasants from subsistence farming to learn crafts including weaving, blacksmithing, winemaking, and leatherwork, and the goods they made fueled trickles of trade. Coins were minted again and came into general use, promoting trade and expanding what was becoming an economy. Markets and clusters of workshops created hamlets and then villages. Local merchants began trading over longer distances, needing ships and pack trains to carry their goods, warehouses to store them in, and employees to handle and sell them.

All this was facilitated by a new sense of order and relative peace on the Continent. The worst of the Viking raids were in the past, the Magyars had subsided in the East, and the Muslims were preoccupied with internal disputes and divisions. With the quelling of Muslim piracy off the coast of North Africa, the Mediterranean Sea was open to Christian traders. Flemish woolen textiles were the first great European export sent to the Middle East, southern Asia, and the Far East, but wines from France, linen from Italy, leather from Spain, and metals from the mines of Germany weren't far behind. A new overland trade route linked the North Sea coast to northern Italy, and along its route a series of trade fairs sprang up in the Champagne district of France.

The growth of trade led to another major change in medieval life: the rebirth of some of the urban centers that had fallen into decay after the fall of the Empire. At first, these began with a few major ports – Venice, Genoa, Hamburg, and Rouen among them – where docks, warehouses, shipyards, and inns catered to merchants, sailors, moneylenders, and all who engaged in commerce. They tended to be built near the fortified premises of a major lord or bishop. In time, new towns began to appear even where Roman cities had never existed.

By the end of the tenth century, only a few of these new towns existed – perhaps a dozen, none of them with more than 10,000 inhabitants. But gradually the new enclaves, called burgs, became markets that beckoned local residents from miles around. Craftsmen moved to the burgs to open shops, peasants went there to escape grubbing in the fields, and fleeing serfs sought freedom. Some expanding towns began to swallow the fortifications that had attracted them and grow walls of their own, only to erupt through them again in a few years and build new walls. By the end of the eleventh century there were several dozen burgs, and some of them had grown past 20,000 residents, now known as burghers.

Lacking precedents or legal formulas for dealing with the problems of urban life, local lords and churchmen alike struggled to cope with the crime, class tensions, and need for basic services that the burgs inevitably posed. Fires were common and deadly in the crowded, filthy streets with wooden houses jammed together. The plague and lesser diseases spread readily; the old local courts were overwhelmed. The human price was high. But urban life was still an improvement over the dreary plight of the medieval peasant.

The adjustment was easy for nobody. The burghers were a new breed in society, fitting none of the established roles of peasant, warrior or churchman. The landlords sensed correctly that the burgs posed a long-term threat to their power and privileges. The merchants wanted protection from outlaws and assurance that their debtors would be made to pay up, but the bishops still condemned money lent at interest and accordingly saw the traders as habitual sinners.

It took decades, and a great deal of trial and error, to work out improvised solutions. The nobles learned to reap great profits from selling monopolies and from the taxes, fees, and tariffs that they could collect. The merchants realized that if they wanted order, they would have to take a hand in providing it, so they organized town councils; the clerics became their guides and mentors in setting rules, providing services, and writing ordinances.

In the long run, the burgs and the burghers undermined the feudal society and the whole medieval lifestyle. City dwellers were nobody's vassals. They were free to come and go, to make profits or to fail, to practice their crafts and create what they pleased; some became drifters or grifters, outlaws or thieves. Freedom wasn't yet prized for its own sake, but the sense of possibility was unlimited. Some burgs even honored a new tradition: Any man, even a runaway serf, would become a freeman after living for a year and a day in town.

And this new society was producing a new culture, distinct from the ways of the Early Middle Ages. A series of strong popes such as Gregory VII had imposed sweeping reforms on the Church. Priestly celibacy was now enforced, and venal priests who exploited their flocks or practiced simony – the sale of sacraments or relics – were disciplined and even defrocked.

In literature, the epic poem *Chanson de Roland* broke new ground with its use of vernacular language and its enormous popularity. And the eleventh century's greatest triumph was the development of Romanesque architecture, erected in hundreds of massive, round-arched churches. There were many regional variations, from stark austerity to elaborately carved decorations, but they were all simply designed and beautifully proportioned, with thick walls, few

windows, groined masonry arches, and large towers. Critics have said it was a style that summed up the character of the Early Middle Ages.

And if that period – and the era of barbarian Europe – can be said to have ended with a single event, it came on the day in November, 1095, when Pope Urban II gave an impassioned speech urging Christians everywhere to join in freeing the Holy Land from rule by infidel Muslims. That launched the Crusades, a series of expeditions that would go on for more than three centuries. The Holy Land would be captured, lost, and struggled over; the final outcome could be called a standoff. But the First Crusade was a turning point, the first time the peoples of Europe put aside their differences and came together in a common cause. Europe was now a force, claiming the leadership that had been lost by Islam and Byzantium, and that role would last for a good eight centuries.

It wasn't all due to the barbarians. But without them, the story – and the history of the world – would be far different.

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GALLERY

A nineteenth-century painting of the sacking of Rome

A painting of the desolation of Rome following its sacking

Ancient Rome’s Aurelian Walls

Scythian stone sculptures in Ukraine

Mythical Scythian flying snow leopards

Ruins of the Scythian fortress of Kara-Tobe in the Crimea

Remains of a girl found in excavating Scythian graves

The seventh-century Visigoth church of Santa Maria de Melque, San Martin de Montalban, Toledo, Spain

Eagle-shaped, Visigoth brooches

Mystical Celtic standing stones

Monument to Queen Boudicca, a leader of the Celts

Celtic ruins, Galicia, Spain

Statue of Vercingetorix

Chalk model of Pope Leo I stopping Attila the Hun

Baptism of Clovis, bas relief in Reims, France

Tomb of Clovis

Mausoleo di Teodorico, one of the most important funerary buildings of the Ostrogoths

Ruins of an Anglo-Saxon castle

Statue of Alfred the Great

Bust of Charlemagne, in which the cranium of the king is kept as a relic

Charlemagne’s throne in Aachen, Germany

Ship in Viking museum in Oslo, Norway

Viking helmet

Traditional Viking village in Iceland

Viking graveyard in Denmark

Map of the barbarian kingdoms before Clovis I

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